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CHELSEA WINDMILL
MUSEUM

THE LAST OF HER LINE.

VOL. III.

THE LAST OF HER LINE

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"ST. OLAVE'S," "JANITA'S CROSS,"

"ANNETTE,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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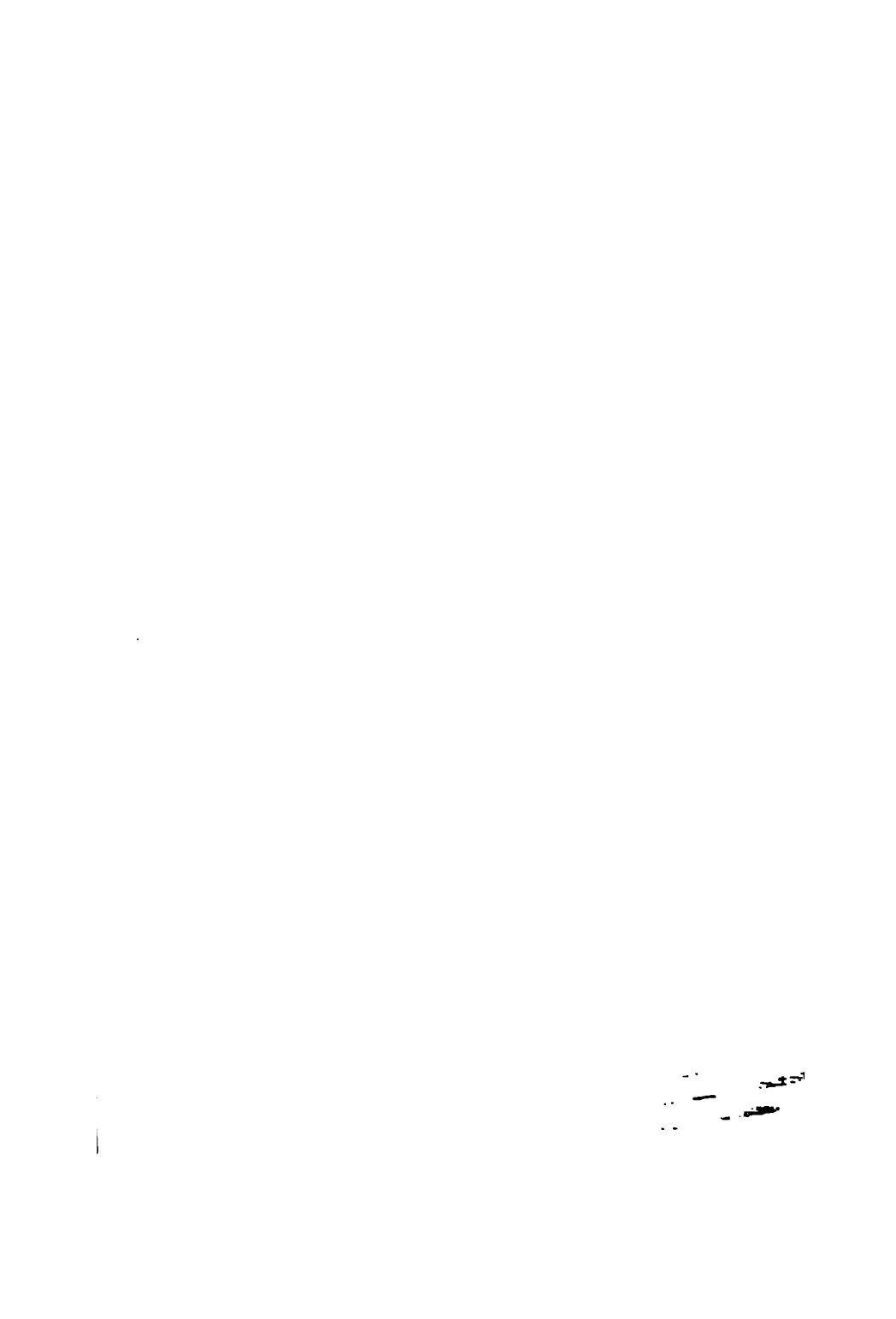
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THE LAST OF HER LINE.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER the postman's call—for though he scarcely ever came to the cottage, Phebe could never settle down to anything until she had seen him pass—she slipped on an old print dress, and went into the kitchen to make some short-cakes. Faith, after seeing the rugs and wraps safely deposited, had had a holiday given her, to go by the carrier to Broadminster, to see her aunt, who lived cook with some of the Cathedral people, and Joan had come over from Mannersby for the day, to keep Miss Phebe company.

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But Joan's eyes and hands did not serve her now for baking short-cakes, as she knew the Miss Maplethorpes liked them to be baked ; and so, whilst Miss Phebe rubbed in the butter, she contented herself with sitting by in her clean gown and high-crowned white cap, and recounting the exploits of the past, when she went out to make sweets and pastry for the big families of Saxelby, ay, and Broadminster, too, " before them new-fangled confectioners' shops was set up."

When the cakes were fairly in the oven, Miss Phebe, being somewhat overheated, went into the parlour to rest, until such time as they should need looking at. And whilst she sat there, she caught sight of Mr. Randolph, in his soft black felt hat, and long-skirted coat, in the act of crossing the road to the cottage gate.

"Joan, it's the vicar!" she said, breathlessly, as she ran upstairs to slip on her other

dress. "Just give a look into the oven before you answer the door, because it heats sometimes all of a sudden, and I should be so sorry for the cakes to be spoiled. Mr. Ducross is sure to come home with them for a cup of tea."

"Yes, ma'am, but I'll warrant the grease has scarcely begun to run yet."

Nevertheless Joan looked, and then went, with the dignity of an old retainer, to answer the door.

It struck Phebe that before changing her dress, which would so soon have to be changed again on account of the cakes, she might as well peep through the banisters and see whether Mr. Randolph was really coming in. He first asked for Miss Iselworth. Finding she was not in, he asked for Miss Maplethorpe. Finding Miss Maplethorpe also was not in, he said there was no need to trouble Miss Phebe, he would call

again at eleven o'clock the next morning.

Much relieved, Miss Phebe came down again. She was glad not to have to change her dress, and more glad to escape an interview with the vicar. She never felt quite at ease in his presence, for the strange reason that he gave her the impression of being such a good man. If he had been a wine-drinking, pleasure-loving man like his predecessor, she would not have had the feeling ; but Mr. Randolph was so unmistakably a Christian, that when she looked into his face she felt her soul would have been just as safe in the Church as anywhere else, and that feeling unsettled her. She said to herself privately that if they had had a man like him in the parish when she was a young girl she should never have joined the Primitives at all ; but of course she never allowed as much as that to any other living person, and she did not even like to

know that she thought it herself. Still the fact was there.

And why on earth had Mr. Randolph called again, when he had been only the day before, and stayed ever so long, and told Mopsie all the news about Mrs. Maleveron? She hoped nothing had happened.

But that little excitement passed away, and the short-cakes turned out beautifully, and she and Joan had an hour of "profitable" conversation in the afternoon, for Joan belonged to the Primitives too, though obliged to attend church at Mannersby; and then Phebe took her work and sat in the porch, to wait for the party from the pic-nic.

They arrived about seven o'clock, Mr. Burrowby Atcherley driving Mopsie upon the box, and Miss Maplethorpe sitting behind. Mr. Burrowby did not come in, no one pressing him to do so; and Mopsie, who seemed not quite in her usual spirits, stole

quietly away to her room without saying anything to anybody, except just good night to Miss Phebe.

“I daresay she’s tired,” said Miss Mapletorpe. “We had a good deal of walking, and there was a stiff breeze to hold up against, coming across the moor back from the copse. We have brought you heaps of blue-bells, but Mr. Ducross is taking care of them for you. And how have you been getting on all day?”

“Very well. Joan and I have been capital company. I made a lot of cakes, feeling sure Mr. Ducross would come in to have a cup of tea with us. I thought he would have set you home from Mrs. Atchley’s.”

“No,” said Callis, “Millicent put him into the carriage along with the married ladies, and I don’t suppose they got on so fast as we did in the wagonette.”

"That was to let Burrowby drive Mopsie home. I told you I was sure he was thinking about her, and Faith says he drove her there, too. Faith waited to see everyone off, you know. I shouldn't wonder at all if he has made her an offer this very day."

"I don't think he has, for she has never been alone with him all the time, and he couldn't very well have said anything to her on the box. But if he could, it would not have made any difference. I am sure Mopsie doesn't want to have anything to do with him."

"Dear me! Callis, you do see into things so. Now I should have said he would have done very nicely for her—and going to India, too, where all her property is. But she's young enough yet to think of anything of the sort. And Mr. Ducross will come in, will he?"

"Oh, yes, he is sure to come to bring

you the flowers. He put them in one of the empty wine-cases, with plenty of wet moss to keep them fresh for you. His trap was to be waiting for him at the Atcherleys, and I suppose he will drive past here on his way home."

"I am so glad I made the short-cakes," said Phebe, with a pleasant smile. John Ducross had long ago ceased to be a "temptation" as regarded her spiritual interests, but it was very sweet yet to feel that he cared to do anything for her, and sweeter still to know that she could do anything for him.

"But, do you know," she continued, "I *was* so afraid they would catch in the oven, for just as I had got them in, and slipped into the parlour to rest myself, who should I see crossing over to the gate but Mr. Randolph, and me in my old baking-gown, and the flour on my fingers! I told Joan to

give a look at them before she answered the door, and then I flew upstairs to tidy myself; but he didn't come in, after all, which was a great relief. He first of all asked if Mopsie was in, and then he asked if you were, and when he found you were both out, he said he would call again in the morning. Whatever could he want, I wonder, for he was only here yesterday, telling Mopsie all the news. Do you think anything has happened?"

"I don't know," said Callis, rather wearily, as she turned to go upstairs, and put off her bonnet. "If anything is the matter, we shall hear of it soon enough. Let us live one day at a time."

"And that for eternity," added Phebe, solemnly. It was an expression she often made use of in the class-meeting, and she tried to live in the spirit of it. "One day at a time, and that for eternity."

"I suppose eternity will take care of itself, if we take care of the days," said Callis, in the quaint dry manner which generally characterised her replies to any remarks which Phebe intended to be "profitable." And then she went into her own room to think about things.

A great deal *had* happened, and somehow she felt as if a great deal more were going to happen. And both head and heart began to be weary with taking in the new ideas which had crowded upon them during the day. Then Mr. Randolph's visit—what did it mean? For if he had only brought a trifling message, he might have given it to her sister.

However, Callis Maplethorpe was not a woman to meet troubles half-way. She tidied herself, sat down for a few minutes' quiet recollection, and then joined her sister in the porch to wait for Mr. Ducross.

He came about half an hour afterwards, with the wild hyacinths, so fragrant in their damp mossy bed. How restless he seemed, Phebe thought, not settling down in the old quiet way as when first he used to come to the house. But he had been like that for some time. Most likely it was the alterations they were making in the management of the school, which was getting on so wonderfully well now. A concern like that must be a great load on a man's mind, and when he had been the means of bringing it to what it was, too.

Joan spread the tea on the little table in the porch, but nobody seemed to want any, and nobody wanted any short-cake, either, for all it was so crisp and brown and savoury.

"Where's Mopsie?" Mr. Ducross said at last. "Why isn't she here?"

"She's gone up stairs to rest," said Phebe,

innocently. "I always think a pic-nic is a tiring thing, and she seems to have been doing a good deal of walking. I know the air blows strong enough across that moor to take you off your feet almost, sometimes. Callis said it was very strong to-day."

Callis did not heed this little attempt to draw her into the conversation. She just sat there in her own corner—Martin's corner of the porch—mechanically twisting the ivy stems round her fingers, and her eyes evidently took in nothing as they wandered away past the little garden and the brook to the Abbey towers, behind which a full moon was slowly creeping up, making lights and shadows shimmer across the quiet of her face. And John Ducross was almost as silent, fidgetting about with his cup and saucer for want of anything else to do. This was not the pleasant little evening Phebe had pictured to herself, as a finish to

the day. They were all to have had such a cosy chat there together, over the tea and the short-cakes, and now nobody seemed to care for anything. It was not that happy silence, either, which comes of full content. Rather each one felt that something ought to be said, yet no one found the proper words to say it in.

Phebe, with the best of intentions, thought she had hit upon something at last. Returning to the subject of Mopsie, she said—

“I’m afraid Mr. Burrowby would think us very impolite, not to ask him in, and when he had taken the trouble of driving them both home, too. And I’m sure he quite expected to be asked, for he was looking about for some one to give the reins to, and he seemed as disappointed as could be when nothing was said about it. But one always thinks of things when it is too late:

I hope Mopsie didn't feel grieved about it, that made her go away all at once."

"I should think Mopsie would feel nothing of the sort," said Mr. Ducross, with a queer look about his mouth.

And then—Phebe Maplethorpe never forgot what came after that—he got up and went to the foot of the stairs, and called out, loud enough for them all to hear—

"Mopsie, come down and say good night to me."

He had to call again, and then she came, with her hat hanging by its strings round her neck, and the brown curls tumbling loosely over her forehead, just as she had gone up nearly an hour before. To think, as Phebe said to herself, that she had been sitting there like that all the time, when they thought she had been resting and tidying herself. Could it have been bad news in the letter which the postman had brought,

and was that what Mr. Randolph had come about ?

But Mopsie did not seem sad or troubled in that sort of way. She came down slowly, step by step, holding herself back against the banisters, just like a very shy girl who has been naughty and is now bidden to say that it is sorry, and feels that it ought to say so, too, but does not like. No petulance, no sauciness, none of that small comical dignity which she had lately learned to put on in the presence of the head-master.

When she got within three steps of the bottom, he took hold of her and lifted her down, then raised her little head and kissed her once, twice, real, honest, lover-like kisses, about whose meaning there could not be the least mistake.

Then he shook hands with the two Miss Maplethorpes, and went away, Mopsie, as soon as she could escape, flying upstairs like

a rocket, apparently to make up for the slowness with which she had come down.

“Oh, Callis!” said Phebe, when they had had time to recover themselves, “is that how it is going to be?”

“Yes,” said Callis, “that is just how it is going to be.”

And neither of them said anything more.

CHAPTER II.

AT the very moment that John Ducross took this exceedingly straightforward method of explaining to Miss Phebe how matters stood, Joan Latimer was coming from the closet under the stairs with a jug of yeast, for the purpose of "setting the bread to sponge," as she called it. Of course she saw the whole of the little drama too, and it was as much as she could do to keep the jug from falling out of her hands, and so betraying her whereabouts. Not, of course, that she could help what people did if they chose to go on in that way, and with

as good as a full moon shining right in at the front door; but she would rather that they did not know she had seen anything.

“So that’s how things are going,” she said to herself, as she stepped quietly back to the kitchen, discreetly closing the door behind her, lest the head-master’s farewells might not be quite over. “Well, I haven’t a word again’ it. It stands to reason she can’t always stop with the Miss Maplethorpes, and by what I’ve wit enough to see, that other madam, as she calls her Tantie, doesn’t set much store by her.”

Here Joan took out the bread bowl and put the proper quantity of flour into it from the barrel behind the dresser, and a little salt, and then, digging a hole in the middle, she poured the yeast carefully in, and stirring the flour gently over it, set it before the fire to “work.”

“There, it’ll be ready again’ Faith comes

home to knead it, unless I do it myself for her, as I lay she'll be rare and tired with her day's pleasuring. It's the way now, the young ones gets the pleasure and the old ones the work; not but what I'd sooner mind the house nor go tewing to Broadminster like that. And no wonder the short-cakes wasn't wanted, after all Miss Phebe's trouble, bless her! But Faith can warm 'em for breakfast to-morrow, or even later. A good baking's never wasted."

And then Joan went in to ask whether, as the ladies had come back, she might go to the turn of the road to meet her niece, the carrier's cart stopping there and setting down its passengers for that end of the town. But as the two walked home together, laden with Faith's purchases in Broadminster, the old lady said never a word of what she had seen. It was not her way to gossip.

Afterwards, they all, Mopsie excepted, assembled for family worship, Phebe reading a chapter, and praying "out of her own head." And no one who saw them could have told that anything remarkable had happened that day to anyone.

Mopsie loitered long in the moonlight before she lit her lamp and read the letter which Miss Phebe had placed upon her dressing-table in the morning. For one thing, it was, as she knew by the handwriting, from Mrs. Maleveron, and within the last two months Mrs. Maleveron had become an almost inappreciable quantity in her life, so little real influence had that graceful woman of the world ever exerted upon her of any kind which went deeper than ordinary daily necessities. All that was really bright and beautiful and worthy had come to her quite apart from Tantie, would never have come to her at all if Tantie had not

found it convenient to send her to Miss Maplethorpe for that couple of months so nearly ended now.

Mopsie leaned her little chin on the window seat, and thought about it all ; and so pleasant was the thinking that her eyes were heavy with sleep and dreams, and the letter was lying opened, but still unread, on her lap, when the Abbey clock struck twelve.

Then pushing back her hair and dashing a lot of cold water over her face, she set to work upon Tantie's eight pages of fine cream laid note-paper.

It was an exceedingly bright and kind and pleasant letter, with the scarcely definable, but very perceptible insincerity running through it, which characterised all that Mrs. Maleveron thought, or said, or wrote.

She hoped her dear little pet was taking care of herself and enjoying her visit

immensely, and she must never forget how kind those excellent Miss Maplethorpes—old frumps she had called them to Mr. Burrowby Atcherley—had been to her in making her feel so much at home with them. But she must not let herself be so absorbed by the pleasures of life at the cottage as to be unmindful of her other friends in the parish, and especially she must show every attention to the dear Miss Atcherleys, who were evidently so very anxious to be intimate with her, and whose brother had been so excessively polite ever since they came to the place. Indeed his manner lately had been so marked that she should scarcely have felt it the thing to leave home, just at that juncture, without placing her under the care of friends who, she was sure, would do everything in their power to advance her interests in a right direction.

Here Mopsie gave the letter an impatient twitch, and then she laughed a low, little laugh of perfect happiness—such a laugh as one only hears from a girl who has her life before her.

Because, as Mrs. Maleveron continued, dear Mopsie must remember that, though her manners were so very childish, she was really a child in years no longer, and that in a large place like Saxelby she must expect things to be very different from what they had been in that little, poking village down in Hampshire—Mrs. Maleveron, in her last letter to Mrs. Darrell, had called the poking village a perfect paradise, but that was of no consequence; paradise might be poky upon occasion, as for instance when Adam was doing the gardening by himself—and she must remember that now perhaps interpretations would be put upon her conduct for which

she was not prepared, and therefore she must lay aside those little foolish ways which might place her at a disadvantage in the eyes of a man of intelligence and worth.

His "intelligence and worth" was a happy hit. It lifted the letter, Mrs. Maleveron felt when writing it, above the dead level of worldliness which might otherwise have struck even a child like Mopsie.

Then she made a few little remarks about preparation for the serious duties of life, and went on to say that, though their relations with each other had always been in the highest degree harmonious, ever since she brought dear Mopsie a helpless baby from India, still she could not hide from herself that the time must come when she should probably be called upon to give her up to some one, whose right it would be to protect her all through life; and she did not

dare to think what a trial the separation would be. But she should never dream for a moment of making that a consideration, when Mopsie's real interests were at stake. And then she turned again to certain attentions which ought to be paid to the Miss Atcherleys, and ended by a few remarks about Mr. Burrowby, which plainly enough indicated the light in which she desired him to be considered.

It was a thoroughly selfish letter, and yet there was an air of pleasantness and good will about it, and its vulgarity was hidden under such appropriate language that no one could be offended by it. Mopsie, who had nothing in her nature for it to take hold of, just gave herself another impatient twitch, and stuffed the letter into her drawer, and then said her prayers and went to sleep.

Next morning old Joan Latimer, who had been staying all night at the cottage, to be

ready to help Faith with a wash, got up very early, and came down to knead the bread, so that it might be out of hand before the more laborious operations of the day began. To her disgust, the mixture which she had arranged so carefully the night before was quietly remaining in its original condition, not having so much as taken the trouble to rise an inch, instead of boldly mounting to the very top of the bowl, as it generally did after Joan had "set it to sponge."

"I know what it is," said the old woman, as she poked her finger here and there into the too solid dough; "it is because I was a-worretting so when I poured the barm in. My poor mother used to say it's no use having a light hand if you haven't a light heart, when you're agate with bread, for you may tew and tew, and better tew, and it'll all be to no good, so long as you put in your own worrets along with the barm, same

as I was doing last night, after I'd seen how things was going to be with the young lady. Not but what it's all right for her, Mr. Ducross being what he is, but Miss Maplethorpe'll take it to heart a deal, for she's that set on her as she might be her own child."

And Joan made up the fire, and cut a deep cross in the dough for good luck, and set it back again to do better for itself, if it could.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER breakfast the man from the vicarage came, bringing the Indian letter which had arrived the day before. It was enclosed in one to Mopsie from Mr. Randolph, saying that he should call himself during the afternoon, or even earlier, if parish matters did not detain him. Only he thought it was better for her to read the letter first, and then he should be better able to talk to her about it.

His messenger had not got out of the garden gate when the Grammar School porter came, with two other notes, one for

Miss Maplethorpe and one for Mopsie. They had been written late the night before, too late for the man to bring them, and Miss Maplethorpe's was to tell her that at eleven o'clock a telegram had come, summoning him to a relative in London who was dangerously ill. He was starting by the midnight train, and could not tell when he should be back ; but it would be as early as possible, because he wanted to have matters settled with Mr. Randolph.

Mopsie's letter was not so business-like. Indeed, it was so very unlike business that the girl, with a happy smile and a rosy flush on her face, sat poring over it, taking in the sweet meaning of each simple, heart-coined sentence, and linking each with a whole world of blissful imagining, whilst her uncle's letter, which had been brought to her by Faith at the same time, lay quite unheeded in her lap. Not until, looking

up, she saw Mr. Randolph himself coming slowly across the Abbey meadows, evidently in the direction of the cottage, and evidently with something important on his mind, did she rouse herself to the realities of everyday life, as represented by the prosaic-looking Indian missive which he had sent to her.

It was from Mr. Denham, one of her Bombay trustees, the gentleman whose wife was to have received her and made a home for her, if, on her coming of age, she had chosen to return to the country. Mr. Denham put his story into as few words as he could, promising to send further particulars by succeeding mails. He was sorry to say that for some seasons past the reports of the late Mr. Iselworth's plantation in the North West had not been satisfactory, though they had every reason to believe that the manager was doing his best with the estate.

It was not a paying concern when Mr. Iselworth himself took it, but his own personal supervision had done a great deal for it, and at the time of his death it had become a very remunerative property. After that, it had gone on well enough for some years, under the management of people who knew his own method, but they were sorry to say that of late it had been falling off again, and of course the great distance made it impossible for the Bombay trustees really to know how things were going on. For two years the profits had been barely sufficient to pay the hundred and fifty pounds agreed upon for Miss Iselworth's expenses in England, so much money having been sunk in new presses and additional labour, which had become necessary if the estate was to be properly cultivated; and their last accounts were that the thing had entirely ceased to pay its way, and that they

had decided to sell the plantation for what it would fetch, and with the proceeds pay off outstanding debts which were now being pressed upon them.

Mr. Denham said he was very sorry they should not be able to continue the yearly payments, but his wife would be very glad to receive Miss Iselworth and make a comfortable home for her in Bombay, if she thought well to come out. When everything was realised, there might be an annual income of about thirty pounds for her personal expenses, certainly not more than that. If she preferred remaining in England, and doing something to earn her own living there, the trustees would take care that this little remnant should be securely invested for her, and they also said that a case containing books, papers, and other articles belonging to her father should be sent home. The plate, linen, and other valuable

effects, they said, had already been entrusted to Mrs. Maleveron.

Mopsie read the letter through once without gaining a very clear impression of its contents. She was beginning it a second time when Miss Maplethorpe sent up to say that Mr. Randolph was in the parlour and wished to speak to her.

The new vicar of Saxelby might be what is generally called a "very shut up man," but he was one whose best qualities always came to the surface when other people needed help. If he rarely spoke about his own affairs, or asked for sympathy in his own anxieties, it was certainly not because, in that particular, he did as he would be done by, for no man was more ready to give the best of what he had, let it be money, time, or sympathy, when asked for any of these precious things. Moreover, when he did give advice, or offer help, it was to the point.

Accordingly he came now to tell Mopsie that, although he was very sorry about the bad news from India, it need not make any difference to her, so far as her home was concerned.

“You know, child, you have no claim upon my sister. The arrangement made by the trustees was simply that a certain sum should be paid for your expenses, and now that it cannot be paid any longer, you are independent of each other. But I have thought the matter over, and I want you to consider my house your home, just as it has been for the last seventeen years, and I will charge myself with your maintenance, just as if you were my own child. Indeed, I think——” and here a curiously bright expression came over the vicar’s “shut up” face——“Indeed, I think, when my sister leaves me, as in the course of a few months, more or less, she may find it expedient to do, it

would be a very pleasant arrangement for you to remain and employ yourself in any little household amusements which may be agreeable to you. I am sure, miss——” and here the vicar stopped, fumbled about with a little gold coin which hung from his watch-chain, and continued, “that is to say, I wish everything to remain as it was, so far as you are concerned. Do you understand?”

“I understand that you are very good to me,” said Mopsie, feeling as if she should very much like to go up and kiss him, but not daring to do it, as he never expected that sort of thing except when she bade him good night. “Then is it really true that I haven’t anything any more?”

“Nothing, except this twenty or thirty pounds which the trustees say may be saved after the affairs are settled.”

“And if I did not live with you?”

“But, my child, you *are* going to live with us—I mean, to live with me; that is, I am quite sure, miss—or at least it is my wish until my sister makes other arrangements.” And again the vicar began to fumble with the little gold coin.

Mopsie could not understand who this “miss” was, that kept cropping up; but, ignorant as she was of the world in a general way, she was quite sure that Tantie would have a great deal to say to any arrangement which kept her there without the payment of the regular hundred and fifty pounds a year. And so she persisted.

“But, uncle, supposing things did *not* go straight, and I could not live with you.”

“Well, in that case, my dear, I imagine you would have to do something to earn your own livelihood, and I really do not know how you would do it. Your education, I regret to say, has not exactly fitted

you for the post of instructress to young people, and there is no other occupation open to you, so far as I am aware. Unless you were to enter a sisterhood, and I really don't——"

"No, nor I don't, either," said Mopsie, energetically, as she tried to picture herself in a long black dress and cloak, and one of those stiff white caps in which the little sisters of the poor looked so pretty. How she could keep the cap in its place, unless her hair were all cut off, would be a standing question; and she never could be tidy enough, even if she was all right in other ways. She could only think of net-sprigging, and she was going to mention that, when Mr. Randolph went on—

"But, as I said before, you will remain at the vicarage, and so there is no need to trouble yourself about it. I have not said anything to your aunt yet. I should like

you to write to her yourself, and enclose that letter, and ask her to tell you exactly what she thinks about it. She is a very practical woman. I did write to her myself, only a day or two ago, but my letter was upon quite a different subject. Now good-bye, child, and do not let it be a trouble to you."

And with that Mr. Randolph went away, not even stopping to have a chat with Miss Maplethorpe.

When he got home, he settled down in front of his writing-table, and took a sheet of his best note-paper, and began to write. But he got no further than the date and "My dear Marian."

Then he leaned back, and the curiously bright look came into his face.

"I am sure Marian will not object. Indeed, looking at everything as she does, from the stand-point of duty, she will see in

it a new sphere of usefulness. And for Mopsie such companionship will be invaluable. I have not done my duty to the child. I have not filled up my sister's shortcomings. I have left undone those things which I ought to have done."

And then the good man's thoughts turned to prayers, and he asked forgiveness for what he considered wasted opportunities, before he allowed himself to rest upon the pleasant future which had just begun to stretch before him. For Mr. Randolph, unknown to anyone except the bride-elect, was going to be married, and the lady was "My dear Marian."

That was what he had written to Mrs. Maleveron about, though probably she had not received the letter yet, since she was travelling with Mrs. Darrell from place to place in South Devon, and had no regular address.

Mopsie Iselworth, spite of her various eccentricities, had a fair share of the clear-sightedness which follows upon singleness of heart. And when her uncle had gone away, she went back to her own room, and, before even telling Miss Maplethorpe anything about it, set herself down to think about what had happened.

John Ducross did not just then occupy her thoughts, save as an unconscious light and background to them all. He had told her, only a few hours before, that he loved her, and she had said what she felt to be simply and entirely true, that she loved him too. The change which that hour in Thoroldsby Copse must bring over all her life, was as yet too near to be intelligible. It is possible to walk through a rainbow without having more than the vaguest idea of its beauty. People standing at a little distance have generally the best of the

prospect, and probably Miss Maplethorpe and Phebe, gazing on Mopsie's happiness from the covert of their own quiet, uneventful maidenhood, saw more of its glow and glory than she was yet able to realise for herself.

This she could realise, however, since her uncle's visit, that all her property had been swept away, and that, in consequence, Tantie would be glad to get rid of her as soon as convenient. So she read the Indian letter over again, to make quite sure that she understood it; and then she read Mrs. Maleveron's admirably-worded epistle, and then she wrote as follows :—

“DEAR TANTIE,—Thank you very much for your letter. I can't help knowing what you mean about Mr. Atcherley, but I don't like him at all, and I don't want things to go in that way. And Uncle George says I

am to send you this letter, which came yesterday. You see, I have lost all my money, except about twenty pounds a year. Please write and tell me what you think about everything. Your affectionate

“CALLIS ISELWORTH.”

CHAPTER IV.

MOPSIE kept the letter open for Miss Maplethorpe to see, and then she read the one from John Ducross over again, and kissed it, and put it safely away in her writing-desk, and dreamed a little, and got far enough away from the rainbow for a moment or two, to see how beautiful it was; and then everything seemed to come into a tangle again, and she thought she had better tell Mother Callis. How much more Mother Callis meant to her now than Tantie, and what a strange instinct had led her to pick up the sweet name so quickly!

Miss Maplethorpe felt that something had happened when she saw Mr. Randolph come up with that very business-like look upon his face, and heard him ask to speak to Miss Iselworth. She thought at first that he had been having an interview with Mr. Ducross, but then she remembered, with something like relief, too, considering the expression of Mr. Randolph's face, that that could not be the case, as he would never have gone to the vicarage so late; and besides, Wednesday was the week evening service at the little railway church, and it was never over until past nine, and then there were poor people to see, and other matters to be attended to. Mrs. Maleveron said her brother rarely came home before ten on Wednesday evenings.

Then she thought it must be something about Mrs. Maleveron herself. Was she going to be married, and would Mopsie

have to look out for another home—at least, until John Ducross took her to his own? Because Mrs. Maleveron quite had the air of a woman who was ready to marry again—indeed, she had dropped one or two little hints which almost conveyed the impression that she intended to do so, and perhaps she might even now be paying farewell visits, before making a permanent change in her arrangements. If it were not that, Miss Maplethorpe could think of nothing else.

She had been wondering about it for some time, when Mopsie came down, and in a very matter-of-fact voice, just as matter-of-fact as might have been suitable if she had come to announce that a button was missing from her gloves, said,

“What do you think? Uncle George has brought me a letter from the people in India, and the indigo plantation is finished

up, and I haven't anything left but about twenty pounds a year. I have been writing to tell Tantie, and here is the letter for you to see. Uncle George says it need not make any difference, because I can keep on living with him just the same, but I don't think Tantie would care for that, when I could not pay her anything."

Miss Maplethorpe was wise enough to think so too, but she did not say as much.

"That was an unlucky letter, Mopsie, but I hope the other made up for it."

The rosy colour flushed all over Mopsie's face. She tumbled herself down on a stool at Miss Maplethorpe's knee, and hid her face in her lap.

"Will it do?" she said, pulling out her own exceedingly short epistle to Mrs. Maleveron, and handing it up to be looked at, by way of making a turn in the conversa-

tion. "I must show you first, though, what she said about Mr. Atcherley."

And off she went, coming back with Tantie's crumpled letter of the day before.

"I was so vexed," she said, "and I scrunched it up like that. Why couldn't she be quiet? As if I wanted ——"


And poor Mopsie, who had had just a little too much excitement during the last twenty-four hours, burst out into a good cry.

Miss Maplethorpe did not try to stop her, thinking it might be the best thing for her, after all that had happened. She only read over the two letters, and then took the girl into her arms and let her rest quietly there until the storm had spent itself.

"Now, Mopsie, we will have a walk to the almshouses. I want to ask the chaplain if Joan may have leave to stay a day or two, to help Faith to get up the wash, and

a mouthful of fresh air will do you all the good in the world, especially after Tantie's letter. But you must not trouble yourself about it. Different people have different ways of looking at things. It will all come right. Go off and fetch your hat, and we will talk things into shape out of doors."

Which they did, and succeeded in putting them into such pleasant shape, too, that Mopsie came back as bright and cheerful and merry as ever, with only just the little touch of thoughtfulness which could never quite go away from her any more now; the thoughtfulness which has to come with all that is best and sweetest in life, or it would not be half so good or half so sweet. And then Miss Phebe, who was always very busy on the fortnightly washing day, had to be told about what had happened; and as she had no time to come



into the parlour and listen to it, Miss Maplethorpe and Mopsie had to go out into the kitchen, which was smelling so deliciously of fresh air from the piles of newly-dried linen just brought in from the garden, and Mopsie folded the pocket-handkerchiefs, feeling very proud of the exploit, and Miss Phebe damped and rolled up the "starch things," and helped Faith, who was busy pegging out in the back garden, to sprinkle and shake and fold the linen sheets and table-cloths which were poor Mrs. Maplethorpe's own spinning. Mopsie had never seen a wash before, because Mrs. Maleveron put hers out, as she did her dress-making and her religion, and had it brought back, ready to wear, so it was a wonder and delight to watch all the different processes; besides, as Miss Phebe said, there was no telling but what she might find it useful some day, even if she never

needed to put her hands to that sort of thing herself.

“Because, you see,” she added, with a glance into the back-kitchen, to be sure that Joan was out of hearing, “servants are not what they used to be, and some gentlemen are so particular about their cuffs and fronts, and if you don’t know how to do them yourself, the washerwoman will soon find it out, and put upon you to that extent for soap and starch and blue, that you may spend a fortune upon it and never have your things decent. At least Mrs. Atchertley says that is the way with Mrs. Bainsley, and Mrs. Bainsley owns it would have been pounds into her pocket if she had ever been taught how to do things.”

Mopsie looked serious. This was the other side of the rainbow. And she determined to get Miss Phebe to teach her all

about housekeeping, lest anything so dreadful should happen to her. For her ideas at present upon the subject were of the vaguest; and many other domestic functionaries besides the washerwoman might have "put upon" her to an extent which Phebe, trained from her youth up in all the mysteries of household management, could scarcely even have dreamed of.

In the afternoon, Mrs. Maleveron's letter having been duly posted, Mopsie and Miss Maplethorpe sat at the net sprigging in the front parlour.

"Mother Callis."

"Well."

"I've got a thought in my mind."

"You would be very badly off if you hadn't, child."

"Does that mean you don't want to listen to me?" said Mopsie, looking up quickly to

see if Miss Maplethorpe was in one of those moods when she did not like to be disturbed.

“Not a bit, Mopsie. I was only thinking that you would want a great many of them before long. It’s a long road, little one, that you are setting out upon. But what was this particular thought about?”

“You remember telling me that you could earn a great deal by this sort of work, if you had only more time and more eyesight. Now why shouldn’t I stop here with you, and get my living by doing it for you? I believe I could do almost twice as much as you do in a day, if I really set to it.”

“I believe you could, Mopsie, but Mrs. Maleveron would never allow such a thing for you. She would consider it a disgrace.”

Yet Callis felt such a heart-beat of joy as she said it, at the thought of keeping Mopsie with them always, at least for the little always that remained.

"But, Mother Callis, Tantie is not my aunt. She is just nothing at all."

"She is everything, Mopsie; at any rate until she chooses it not to be so. She has taken care of you ever since you were almost a baby, and you must not take matters into your own hands until you know what she thinks."

"I think I *have* been taking them rather much into my own hands, though," said Mopsie, colouring a little.

"You mean about Mr. Ducross. Well, yes, but that is different. In one way Mrs. Maleveron has nothing to do with that. It was not your place to ask anyone before you told Mr. Ducross that you loved him, when he had once said that he loved you. That was a thing between yourselves alone. What is to come afterwards you must ask other people about, and so must he, but not about whether you love each other or not.

Nobody had any right to interfere with you in answering *that* question."

"Well, then, supposing Tantie does not want me very much to stay with her, when she finds I have lost all my money."


Miss Maplethorpe could not help smiling at the bold way in which Mopsie put it, no drapery of circumlocution, but just the unadorned truth—exceedingly unadorned.

"If Tantie does not think it well for you to stay with her, I shall be very glad indeed for you to stay with me."

"And get my living by doing the net?"

"I am not sure that Mr. Ducross would like that. You must consider *him* now."

"So I must," said Mopsie, with a pretty little touch of the submissiveness which was to be her future glory. "I had not thought of that. But I am quite sure he would not want me to be a burden upon you, and so it will be all right. And I am quite sure of



this, too, Mother Callis, that however much Uncle George says I may go back to him, and be just the same, without paying at all, I will never, *never* do it whilst Tantie is there, unless she says the very same. If you won't let me stay with you, I will go right far away, and do something that won't let me be a burden upon anybody. I will advertise, or something."

"All right, child. But wait until Tantie's answer comes. It will be time enough to make up an advertisement when we have thought about things a little longer. Your letter is hardly in the post yet."

"And if Tantie is at Chalford, I can get an answer the day after to-morrow. I am sure she will write as soon as ever she can. And you will see she will write ever so nicely, but she will tell me that she does not want to keep me any longer. I will undertake to finish all this piece of net by Satur-

day night, if she tells me anything else than that she does not want to keep me any longer."

And then Phebe came in to ask Mopsie if she would like to go into the kitchen and see the starch things ironed. There was nothing like knowing about everything. And Joan would show her how to keep the iron from sticking.

CHAPTER V.

THE letter did arrive at the expected time, Mrs. Maleveron not only having written as soon as ever she could, but having driven over with her letter to the nearest post-town, in order that Mopsie might not be left a day longer than necessary in ignorance of her aunt's intentions.

Another letter came for her at the same time, but Miss Maplethorpe, who took them both from the postman, discreetly put that one into her pocket, thinking that very probably poor Mopsie would need something to comfort her after the Chalford communications.

"Here it is," she said, coming into the parlour, where Mopsie was labouring away with most un-Mopsie-like perseverance over a square net shawl for the Bishop's mother, which she had determined to finish in a week. She was certainly earning enough to pay for her board and lodging now, if Mrs. Maleveron would allow her to go on.

"Now we shall see," she said, springing up and tearing the letter open. It began thus—

"DEAR CALLIS."

Mopsie flung it across to Miss Maplethorpe; then gathered herself in a little heap on the floor, and placing her elbows on her knees, rested her chin in the palms of her hands, a favourite position with her when giving her mind seriously to anything.

"There now! I *know* it's going to be bad. When everything is right, Tantie calls me Mopsie. When things are going just a

little wrong, it squeezes up to Mops; but when the worst comes to the worst, I am nothing but 'dear Callis.' Now *you* may read the rest, please."

Miss Maplethorpe did.

"DEAR CALLIS,

"I will not waste time by referring to the commencement of your letter, as the change which has unfortunately passed over your prospects will probably prevent your doing anything in that direction now, even had not the foolish prejudices at which you hint not done so already. I will proceed at once to the more immediate subject, the loss of your Indian property, which requires fresh arrangements to be made for you in England. You are, of course, aware that my connection with you is merely one of courtesy, that I am not in any way responsible for your guardianship,

which is vested in Mr. Denham and another gentleman ; so that no obligation rests upon me to provide for you when the payment which has hitherto been made ceases. We are simply strangers, except so far as I have always cherished a very sincere affection for you, and behaved to you exactly as if you had been my own child. But I am not bound in any way, nor have I any legal authority over you.

“From the very light manner in which you mention a loss which ought to cause you grave anxiety, I infer that you take it for granted my dear brother will wish you to remain with him ; but I can assure you that there is no possibility of anything of the kind, as events which may shortly take place will make quite evident to you.”

“I wonder what she means ?” said Mopsie.

“But wasn’t I right about the beginning ?”

Miss Maplethorpe went on—

“I have therefore been exerting myself in your behalf, for though I have never received that gratitude from you which I might reasonably have expected, I know my duties far too well to neglect them from any merely personal feeling; and I am happy to say I have met with a situation for you, where you will be perfectly comfortable; whilst at the same time I shall feel that you are in good hands, and preparing yourself for a more remunerative position hereafter. Of course I need not explain to you that you must of necessity now earn your own living, and that is why I have arranged for you to come to Mrs. Darrell as nursery governess to her four little children. She promises to be a mother to you, and to secure time for your improvement in studies and accomplishments, so that you may afterwards be able to command a better salary than the fifteen pounds a year which she is

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now willing to give you, and which I cannot help acknowledging is sufficient for your present slender attainments. I do not think you can do better than close with her offer, as she is most kindly disposed to you, for my sake, and will, I am sure, consult your comfort in every way. The children are all under seven years old, so that not much in the way of teaching will be required from you at present, but Mrs. Darrell will, of course, expect you to attend to their wardrobes, and this will be a most admirable training for you, since I need not remind you now how often you have tried me in little matters connected with your own toilette."

"That's the buttons," said Mopsie. "They *were* always coming off."

"Moreover, when you have the charge of young children, you will know for yourself how important it is to cultivate habits

of neatness, and I am not without hope that a year or two with Mrs. Darrell, who is a most orderly woman, will make you all that could be wished. As you have always said you were so fond of children, I am sure you will like this arrangement excessively. I have only to add that dear Mrs. Darrell is ready to receive you at once, as soon as your preparations can be made; and I am coming home myself to-morrow, in order to arrange matters. It is of course a great disappointment to me to shorten my visit in this way, but I never consider myself when the interests of others require attention; so probably in a few hours, or at most a couple of days after the arrival of this letter, you may hope to see me again. Pray give my kindest regards and warmest thanks to the dear Miss Maplethorpes, and believe me, sincerely yours,

“ISABELLA MALEVERON.”

"Now you see, Mother Callis," said Mopsie.

"Yes, now I see," said that good woman, opening her arms, and Mopsie came bounding into them.

"You will let me stay with you now, will you not, and do the sprigged net?"

"We will see," said Miss Maplethorpe, with a twinkle of fun in her eyes. "But perhaps, you know, the four children under seven will be the best preparation for the active duties of life. And then when you have taught them their letters, and seen them safely into bed, and put on all the strings and buttons, you will spend your evenings so pleasantly in the acquisition of accomplishments enough to command a higher salary. That is much more sensible than for Mrs. Maleveron to have been paying for them during the last few years out of the hundred and fifty pounds."

For Miss Maplethorpe's indignation was

roused, and if it had not been satire it would have been tears when the Maleveron letter was finished. But Mopsie seemed neither tearful nor indignant.

“You see I have got just a little money, let us say twenty-five pounds a year, and I should think my clothes cannot cost half that; and if you will only let me stay, I will work so hard that I think I shall almost earn my living. You are only making fun about the four children. You do not really want me to go, do you?”

Miss Maplethorpe's only answer to that was a long close kiss which abundantly settled the question.

“The post brought something else, too,” she said, demurely, drawing John Ducross's letter out of her pocket. “I kept it for a little while because I thought you might perhaps want something to comfort you after the other one.”

Mopsie took the letter. Apparently it was comfort enough, just at first, only to hold it in her hands and spell out every single separate word of the address.

"But supposing," she said, with a happy, saucy little smile, "supposing it should make a difference to him too. Supposing *he* should say that the connection is merely one of courtesy?"

"Well, then, of course it must be either the sprigged net or the four children under seven. But I think you had better run away and find out what he really *does* say, before you make any arrangements. He may have something quite different to propose."

And so he had. For about five minutes after, Mopsie came back to say that he hoped to be home that night, and that he meant to see Mr. Randolph as soon as possible, to ask his formal consent to their

engagement, and to make arrangements for their marriage within two or three months, or six at the very most.

“Won’t Tantie be glad?” said Mopsie, innocently, as she turned back to have a more leisurely perusal of her letter under the old elm-tree in the garden. “You know she will have me quite off her hands then.”

And really Miss Maplethorpe thought she would be glad, too.

CHAPTER VI.

TO do Mrs. Maleveron justice, she was smarting under severe disappointment when she wrote that stiff and heartless letter to her dear Mopsie.

In the first place, she had been slightly chagrined by not having had the companionship of Mr. Ducross in the little tour which had just come to its close. Of course it was not his fault. The interests of the school no doubt demanded his presence, and probably he was quite as sorry as she was to have missed those delightful little entomological excursions, which might, had he seen matters in the same light as herself,

have brought them to such a successful issue. That, however, would doubtless soon right itself. Evidently she had not lost her power over him. His being so eager about the South Devon tour had quite proved that, and with a little management she could bring him round again, even though the Saxelby people did say he had such an objection to the society of ladies. Still she must say that his absence had been an annoyance to her.

Then coming home with dear Mrs. Darrell to Chalford, after the little tour, she had found two letters awaiting her—one from her brother, which had been there some days; the other, only arriving on the morning of her own return, was from Mopsie.

Of course she opened her brother's first. It was to inform her of important changes in his arrangements. That little trip to Oxford which he had spoken of quite inci-

dentally, as though his taking it or not was of no consequence at all, had produced consequences of which Mrs. Maleveron never dreamed, so convinced was she of his determination to live a single life. He had actually come back engaged.

The fact was, as he now told her, that for many years an attachment had existed between himself and Miss Marian Granger, the younger of two estimable sisters who lived in his old Oxford parish, and who devoted themselves to works of charity and mercy. But as Miss Marian's means were very limited, and his own, whilst he was holding the living of Chalford, were in the same condition, he had never felt justified in explaining his feelings to her, though he could not help hoping that, during some part of that time, she must have been conscious of his preference.

Now, however, that things had altered

with him for the better, he was quite sure his sister would rejoice with him in his prospects of domestic happiness, and also in the advantage which would accrue to the parish through the residence in it of a lady whose reputation for piety, prudence, and benevolence was on the lips of everyone who knew her well. He had written to her at once upon receiving the news of his preferment to Saxelby; but she, with a dignity and modesty which he could not sufficiently admire, had declined to give him a definite answer until after a personal interview, and it was for that reason that he had gone over to Oxford as soon as possible after his settlement in the parish. Now, however, everything was arranged, and the marriage was to take place in six weeks, both of them having known each other long enough to make further delay unnecessary.

But Mr. Randolph added, with considerate

brotherly kindness, he did not wish this happy change in his prospects to interfere with his sister's comfort in any way. He had been turning the matter over in his own mind, and had also mentioned it to Marian, and she was quite willing to accede to his proposal that Mrs. Maleveron and Mopsie should live with him as heretofore. Or, if his sister preferred it, he should be happy to make her an allowance, which, with her own little income, and the amount paid by Mopsie's trustees, would enable her to take a house for herself in Saxelby, where rents were not very high. Because, he said, he felt that her responsibilities in regard to the young girl were great, and he would not on any account interfere with the trust which she had held for so many years.

It was a kind, thoughtful letter, and Mrs. Maleveron felt, when she had read it, that,

if the thing had to be done at all, it could not have been done better. Her own common sense, of which she had enough, told her that her brother had a perfect right to please himself, and that, if he chose to marry, her interest would be to accept the position with as much pleasantness as possible. As for remaining with him, she thought she should scarcely like to do that, since she could no longer take her place at the head of his table, or arrange matters in the house to her own satisfaction, Miss Granger being a woman who knew what was due to herself, and who would not be likely to give up her rights to anyone. Neither should she, under present circumstances, care to burden herself with a house, it being highly probable that that arrangement would be only temporary. But she should be very glad to accept her brother's kind offer of an allowance, and then, with

her own income and Mopsie's, she would take handsomely-furnished rooms in the best part of the town, and keep up a good appearance, until she saw how matters were likely to end.

This was the conclusion she arrived at, after reading through and pondering Mr. Randolph's letter. She then turned to Mopsie's, which compelled her to take all her plans to pieces again.

She had to read both that and the Indian letter two or three times over before she could quite understand the bearings of the situation. When at last they did reveal themselves to her, a very dark shade came over her face, and she knitted her finely-pencilled eyebrows until there was no longer any beauty left in them.

What an unprecedented nuisance for the girl to lose her property just at the time when it was becoming so necessary to the

comfortable arrangement of affairs ! Because, at the outside, she could not expect her brother to allow her more than fifty or sixty pounds a year ; and that, with the mere pittance which her poor dear husband had left her, would go but a very little way towards keeping up anything like a good appearance in the place. Whereas, with that hundred and fifty pounds which had been paid so regularly, and with only a girl of Mopsie's exceedingly small requirements to provide for out of it, such a great deal might have been done. Because, to do the girl justice, she was not at all unreasonable in matters of dress. Any old thing might be made down for her, she was quite content. Plumes, laces, bows, odds and ends, which young people were generally so fond of, she did not seem to care for a bit, and never so much as asked for anything to be spent upon her in brooches and sleeve links,

which was very convenient. So long as she could get a holland frock clean on three times a week, and not be very much scolded when she spoilt it by climbing into that old apple-tree, she never thought of anything else. So that there had been a considerable margin round the hundred and fifty pounds.

However, there was one comfort. She was in no way bound to provide for the girl, now that her property was gone. George had talked about responsibilities in connection with her, but that was pure nonsense. She had no legal connection with her whatever, having merely undertaken the care of her at her father's death, at the request of the trustees, who must of course now take matters into their own hands; it was no concern of hers. And if he meant moral responsibilities, that was pure nonsense, too. She never troubled herself about moral

responsibilities when her own interests prospered better without them. She had done the best she could for Mopsie, so long as she was paid for it; now Mopsie must do the best she could for herself.

To that end a situation in some quiet, respectable family would be the most desirable thing. Only a few days before, Mrs. Darrell had been saying how she should like to meet with an intelligent, lady-like girl of good manners and accent, to undertake the care of the four little ones, for really those vulgar nursemaids gave themselves such airs, and were so independent, and would not so much as put on a button or a string, unless it was down in the agreement, that there was no such thing as doing anything with them. She would cheerfully give a young lady fifteen pounds a year, and treat her like one of the family, to make sure of having the children properly attended to,

and to know that they were growing up with a correct accent, and all that sort of thing, which was so very important.

Mrs. Maleveron had only listened then, blandly assenting to everything, particularly the importance of good accent and manners. But now——

She put away the letters, smoothed her eyebrows, and went downstairs to Mrs. Darrell, who was doing lace-work in the drawing-room, the two elder children pulling about at her dress, and tangling her braid, and in various other ways making themselves disagreeable.

Under these circumstances she was quite ready, after having expressed proper sympathy with Mopsie's misfortunes, to listen to the suggestion which Mrs. Maleveron had to make; namely, that the girl should come as nursery governess, with the understanding that she should make herself useful in keep-

ing the children's clothes in order, and should consider herself in every way like the elder daughter of the family.

“And you know, dear Mrs. Darrell, there is one respect in which you will find her exceedingly suitable. The great fault with most of those young people is that they never know how to keep properly in the background. Now I do assure you Mopsie looks upon the background as the most comfortable place, and your trouble will be how to get her *into* the drawing-room, rather than how to keep her out of it.”

Mrs. Darrell allowed that that would indeed be an advantage.

“Yes. And she is so thoroughly in her element amongst children, knows all their little ways, and can tell them no end of stories, besides singing to them from morning to night, if the nursery happens to be in a place where you will not be inconvenienced

by the noise. And then, you know, her accent is everything that could be wished. I have taken the utmost care of that, because a bad accent does so interfere with a girl getting on. Poor dear creature! I am afraid there will not be much getting on for her now. She must be content to earn her own living for the rest of her life, for I am sure my income will not allow me to do anything for her. It is most unfortunate."

In words Mrs. Darrell allowed that it was, but in her heart she could not quite take such a gloomy view of things, being delighted at the prospect of a ladylike girl to teach the children, walk out with them, put on their strings and buttons, act as an elder sister to them, and at the same time keep at a safe distance from the drawing-room, for fifteen pounds a year. She struck the bargain there and then, only stipulating

that Mopsie was to enter upon her duties at the earliest possible period ; in fact, the following week, if her wardrobe could be got into order by that time.

So Mrs. Maleveron returned to her own room to tell Mopsie of the successful stroke of business which she had accomplished for her, and to put to flight any little dreams and visions which she might have cherished about being allowed to remain at the vicarage on nothing a year. Then she wrote to "dear George" a most sisterly and congratulatory letter, giving him her cordial good wishes, and hoping that every blessing would attend the step he was about to take. She had long felt, she said, that he was peculiarly fitted for the happiness of domestic life, and she would not for a moment damp that happiness by hinting at the serious change which it would involve to herself. She was thankful to say she dismissed all

such selfish considerations, as unworthy the affection she had always cherished for a brother who was all she had in the wide world.

Then, having decided with herself that to expedite Mopsie's departure, as well as to check any little unfavourable influences which Miss Granger might bring to bear upon her brother respecting that yearly allowance—there was no telling what some women were capable of when they once got hold of a man—it would be advisable for her to return home at once, she told Mr. Randolph that as the time was growing so short she grudged every moment spent away from him. Besides, she was quite sure he would require her help and advice in preparing the house for his bride, and fitting it up with all those little ornaments and luxuries which only a lady could arrange properly. Accordingly she had determined

to sacrifice the remainder of her visit on his account, and should leave Chalford at once, if Mrs. Darrell would consent to part with her so soon.

Mrs. Darrell did consent, and next morning the lovely Mrs. Maleveron was on her way to Saxelby, there to work matters with such success for herself as might be.

CHAPTER VII.

MOPSIE was still sitting under the old elm-tree, pressing out all the hidden sweetness of that love-letter from John Ducross, when Mrs. Atcherley, accompanied by Thomas Burrowby, made her appearance at the garden-gate.

Burrowby, catching sight of a little pink-frocked figure gleaming through the bushes, gallantly made his way thitherwards, leaving Mrs. Atcherley to offer his excuses to the elder ladies. Mopsie's desertion on the day of the pic-nic had slightly disconcerted him at the time, but he was far too conscious of his own merits to take it as in the least

implying any want of appreciation of them. Doubtless Miss Maplethorpe had old-fashioned notions about keeping girls well within bounds, and might think that Mopsie had already been sufficiently blest by a ten miles' drive with him on the box of the wagonette. But here was an opportunity too tempting to be resisted of supplementing that blessing ; and so, giving his mother a gentle hint that she need not hurry her call, he was soon by Mopsie's side, strong in the confidence of success which a young man with a good figure, good address, and good prospects has of course a right to feel under the circumstances.

“ It isn't often he gives me his company out of doors,” Mrs. Atcherley said, with a prideful glance towards the elm-tree, where such a morning coat as only a London tailor could turn out was now contrasting effectively with Mopsie's pink frock ; “ but when I

said I was coming to the cottage, he up and made himself ready directly. Young people will be young, won't they, Miss Maplethorpe? And I don't doubt but what he's got an attraction here more than at home."

Mrs. Atcherley paused here, to give Miss Maplethorpe an opportunity of admitting the proposition, but that lady, absorbed in darning a fine linen table-cloth, did not make any remark beyond saying that she always liked to see young men going about with their mothers. She thought it showed attention and dutifulness, and every mother had a right to expect that from her sons.

"Well, as for that, Miss Maplethorpe, I'm bound to say Thomas Burrowby is as well conducted as I could wish to see, so far as not giving his father any cause for complaint, and never has done; but it isn't much attention I get from him, when there's a young lady in the case. However, I say

it's nothing but right he should have his turn. We've all of us had ours. I declare he was quite in a bad temper at the pic-nic, because he hadn't been able to get Miss Iselworth to himself all the afternoon, but I told him it looked very nice of her to keep so close by you. I never like to see young girls all for putting themselves in the way of the gentlemen, do you?"

Miss Maplethorpe said she did not.

"No, and there's a great deal too much of it now-a-days. It wasn't so when I was young. I'm sure the way Bella Dibthorpe used to carry on before she was married, was more than anybody could have thought, and her mother never so much as checked her; and I told Thomas Burrowby if that was all he had against Miss Iselworth, that she kept herself to herself, it was only what a great many girls would be better if they had the common sense to do. He says Mrs.

Bainsley has a deal of style, though she isn't the sort he should choose for a wife. And how's Miss Phebe?"

"Oh! very well, thank you. She's busy ironing in the kitchen just now. We have had rather a heavy wash to get up this week."

"Have you? And late with it, too. My poor mother used to say, them that irons on Saturdays sluts indeed, and them that irons on Fridays irons for need; but she wouldn't have said it of *you*, Miss Mapletorpe, I'm sure. You had a reason."

"Yes. Wednesday was the pic-nic, and so we thought we had better put it off until the end of the week, and give Faith her holiday to go to Broadminster. She said she had a very pleasant day."

"Did she? Well, it was all right. And so did somebody else," continued good Mrs. Atcherley, with a complacent smile on her

rosy face, "even if Thomas Burrowby didn't get everything squared up to his own likings."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, I said I should tell it to you the very first thing, because I wanted you to have it from the family. It's sure to be talked about soon enough, because of them both being so well known. But I daresay you can guess what it is."

"Is it about Selina and Mr. Anson?"

"Yes, it is."

And Mrs. Atcherley loosened her bonnet strings, and made other little arrangements, preparatory to a comfortable chat.

"They made it up at the pic-nic. I knew as well as could be it would come to that. They've been joking her about it ever since he came to dinner that night, with Mr. Ducross and the old vicar, but I'm not one to count my chickens before they're hatched,

and so I said to Luke, we'll just hold our tongues and see what comes of it. However, it's all settled now. He made her an offer on Thoroldsby Toppin."

"And so Selina is going to be married. Well, Mrs. Atcherley, I'm very glad, and I'm sure I wish them every happiness. Selina is a good girl."

And Miss Maplethorpe, brightening up as every kind-hearted woman ought to brighten up when she hears of even a tolerably suitable engagement, came and put her arms round Mrs. Atcherley's beautiful black velvet mantle and kissed her.

"Thank you," said Selina's mother, wiping the tears out of her eyes. "I'm sure it's very kind of you, but I always said you would be glad to hear it, because I've so often opened out to you about them. And just what she wanted too, because you know she has always set her mind on a

clergyman, on account of being able to get into society more. And I don't see why we need keep it a secret neither, being as good a match as Bella Dibthorpe has made for herself."

"No need at all," said Miss Maplethorpe. "I suppose the young people will not wait very long."

"Well, no. My husband says he means to do handsomely by them, for money's no object to him now. I shouldn't wonder if he makes it up three hundred a year to them. He's rare and pleased, is Luke, about it. He always did say he should like a clergyman for one of them, because of the Dibthorpes being so stuck up ever since they got Bella married to Mr. Bainsley, and him only a proctor, which isn't much after all. I'm going round to tell Mrs. Dibthorpe this very day, but I thought I should like you to know first."

“Thank you,” said Miss Maplethorpe, thinking how differently things had gone when she was engaged herself, now nearly forty years ago; how quietly the memory of that sweet evening had been treasured, as quite too precious for the keeping of even their nearest friends, and how even now, because of that very silence, it was still holy, unbreathed upon by idle gossip, unspoiled by the touch of curiosity. A memory for herself alone, making all life beautiful. But doubtless Selina looked at things in a very different light, and was just as happy in calling her friends and her neighbours together, to rejoice with her over that piece of marriage gold, which, truth to tell, she had been looking for very diligently ever since she left Miss Debonair’s finishing establishment at Broadminster.

“The wedding’s to be in three months,” continued Mrs. Atcherley, briskly, being of

course ignorant of the light in which Miss Maplethorpe was looking at things, "and Selina says she means to have it as gay as gay can be, with eight bridesmaids, four of them in pea green and four in pink, and all the things down from London. Luke says it shall be such a wedding as hasn't been in the Abbey since the Honourable Mrs. Borrowmont was married, more than twenty years ago, and that's why Selina's to have eight. Mrs. Borrowmont only had six, and them in the poorest of white muslin, for I got near enough to them, coming out of the vestry, to guess it at a shilling a yard. But they were a dreadfully poor family were the Lord Merivale's, and she one of nine. Her uncle gave her the silk she was married in, or I daresay it would have been much of a muchness with the muslin. I should think you remember the wedding, Miss Maplethorpe."

"Yes. Phebe and I stood in the Abbey Close to see them come out. Everything looked so pretty, for it was spring-time, and oh! the flowers on each side, up to the west door, and inside too, as far as ever we could see; ferns and lilies and azaleas, and then the children scattered them under her feet. Phebe said she had never seen anything so pretty."

"Well, yes, if the materials had been better, I shouldn't have said but what it was a very handsome wedding. Selina's silk is to be as rich as money can buy it, her papa says, and he's going to give all the bridesmaids theirs. I don't put a word in, for Selina knows more about it than what I do; but so long as she's happy, I shouldn't mind if it was nothing but plain white book at ninepence halfpenny."

"Except the Dibthorpes," said Miss Maple-

thorpe, with a comical look which Mrs. Atcherley did not catch.

“ Well, yes, I should like Bella to see that we can put a good foot forward, and she’s sure to be over. Luke says it won’t be long before Millicent gets off, too; that Mr. Strengle that Bella brought to the picnic scarcely seems able to keep himself out of the house, and if they do make anything of it, I expect it’ll be a double wedding, for he wants to be off back to Germany before the end of summer. Millicent don’t say anything, for she’s a quieter sort than what my Selina is; but I can see it in her face as plain as can be what she means, and gives him every encouragement, I’m sure.”

“ I suppose Mr. Bainsley knows him,” suggested Miss Maplethorpe, to whom Mrs. Maleveron’s ex-lover had not much commended himself during the ride to and from Thoroldsby Moor.

"I suppose he does. Bella says he comes of a regular family, though they haven't a deal to do with, and he talks about the great folks as if he was hand and glove with them. Millicent's a sharp girl, and she says she wouldn't wish for anything better, because you see she has always thought a deal, ever since she went to Miss Debonair's, about people well up, and she says being called *von* is as much as being amongst the county people round here. I say it sounds like *fond* to me, but I daresay I don't know. She's quite left off with Mr. Ducross now, or her pa and me both thought a bit since that was going to come to something."

Miss Maplethorpe was silent. Mrs. Atcherley, taking it as only natural that she should not be so much interested in prospects which had not as yet reached the definiteness of an engagement, continued :

"I tell my husband if it comes to that we

shall be just the same as when we were first married, and Thomas Burrowby and Millicent were off at boarding-school. I've often thought those were the best times, before business got up so and Luke was so particular about his wines, and I only kept two in the kitchen, and could give an eye to dripping and that sort of thing myself, which my present cook would flare up like a furnace if I ventured to mention. But I do declare, here's Thomas Burrowby coming up. How the time must have gone, for he told me particularly I needn't hurry him if I wanted to go back under half an hour, and it can't be that."

"I don't know," said Callis, "I've done a great piece of darning."

And so she had, for she spread it out to see, whilst Mrs. Atcherley tied her bonnet-strings and put herself generally to rights for going home.

CHAPTER VIII.

MOPSIE could not have made that garden *tête-à-tête* so pleasant as young Burrowby had expected, for he came in with the air of a man who has not yet realised the best that life can give him.

“You ladies never seem to be tired of talking,” he said, patronizingly. “I can’t think whatever you find to keep on about. Should you mind my strolling on, ma, if you haven’t quite finished yet? Beg pardon, Miss Maplethorpe, I declare I forgot I hadn’t seen you before. Lovely morning, isn’t it? Air feels like June out there, under the elm-trees.”

"Yes," said Mrs. Atcherley, jocosely, not waiting for Miss Maplethorpe to reply, "I daresay you've found it pleasant enough. I know the time when I could sit out in a March wind and never feel it, but that was before your pa and I were married."

Mrs. Atcherley looked so knowing, and Mr. Burrowby looked so disgusted, that Miss Maplethorpe came to the rescue.

"I believe it is quite true that when people come from India they do not feel the English cold, just at first. Somehow they get such a great deal of heat into their system. I daresay, Mr. Burrowby, if you were to stay here another spring, you would feel it a great deal more."

"That's very well," said Mrs. Atcherley, whilst Burrowby stroked his moustache, and looked round upon the little room as though he thought it needed a compassionate allowance from Government; somehow the whole

place had wonderfully lost its charm for him within the last half-hour. "That's very well, but I believe he's got something better than anything he brought from India to make him comfortable just now. You know we must all have our turn, mustn't we, Miss Maplethorpe? Selina's had hers, and I don't doubt but what Thomas Burrowby and Millicent won't be content without theirs."

And the good mother smiled complacently as she buttoned down the richly-braided front of her mantle, that very one she had given twelve guineas for the week before, because no one else in Low Saxelby had a figure that could carry it. She had quite a right to say what she said, for did she not know that things had gone to a certain length, and was there any doubt that they were in train for going the whole length? Besides, what woman, who has the proper feeling of a mother within her breast, ever

dreams that her son can be other than accepted by the girl upon whom he has conferred the honour of his favour? Mrs. Atcherley did not doubt that Thomas Burrowby and Mopsie had made it up that very morning under the elm-tree.

But the young man only gazed down upon her from the height of his calm superiority.

"I promised to meet Dib at twelve for billiards, and I should think it cannot be far off that now."

"Half-past eleven," said Miss Maplethorpe, not without a certain satisfaction, arising out of her knowledge of circumstances.

"Deary me! you don't say so!" and Mrs. Atcherley bustled about to look for her pocket-handkerchief, and smelling-bottle, and card-case, and a loose brooch or two. "I could have declared it wasn't past the hour. And to think, Thomas Burrowby, of *your* being the one to hurry me away. But

it'll never take you till twelve to get to Mr. Dibthorpe's. Why shouldn't you go back to Miss Iselworth now, and leave me and Miss Maplethorpe here a bit longer? I'm sure I've that much to say, I seem scarcely to have made a beginning."

"Oh! very well. I can leave you here, if you like, but I have business on the road, and it is time for me to be off. We men cannot loiter away our mornings as you ladies do, or the world would very soon stick fast. Good morning, Miss Maplethorpe, so sorry to have missed you on Thursday, when I called to inquire for the ladies."

And away walked the young promoter of the world's progress, supreme in all that tailor-craft could do for him.

Mopsie never said what had happened that morning under the elm-tree, and nobody ever asked her. She was a real little lady, spite of her outspokenness, and the

sometimes comical bluntness of her ways.

In the evening, John Ducross was to come home, which meant, of course, tea and short-cakes in the best parlour, and a stroll round the garden in search of Mopsie, who had a fine talent for getting out of his way when she was wanted. This was the first time they had met since that wonderful good night at the bottom of the stairs, and nothing had been said about it publicly since, though, of course, Phebe knew all about the engagement. That wash had been a most providential thing for giving everybody plenty to do until John Ducross came back and settled everything. Phebe had, indeed, asked her sister if she thought the money would make any difference, and Callis had only looked her through and through, and said—

“*Phebe!*”

But Mopsie had asked herself the same

question over and over again, and she had made up her mind that, before ever she could see him or speak a word to him, she would get Miss Maplethorpe to tell him exactly how things were. After that, when they met, she should know in a moment whether it was going to be merely a matter of courtesy or not.

The train by which Mr. Ducross was to return arrived at six, and so, even giving himself time to call at the Grammar School and see that all was right there, he might very well reach the cottage by half-past—that is, if he were so minded. Faith had set out the tea in the best parlour, and the cakes were covered up in a cloth by the kitchen fire, Phebe peeping at them every now and then to see that they were not spoiling. She had lost that sort of right of possession in the head-master which had been growing up so unconsciously during

the last six months, but still it was very pleasant to have him there, and to feel that they had so much to give him. Phebe could say to herself that there was no home in all Saxelby now to which he came with so much delight as to theirs, and even that was something to be proud about, though she must say she had had her feelings when first she heard what he came for. And if the Indian letter *should* make a difference—

But there Miss Phebe dropped the cloth over the short-cakes, and hurried away to her own room, and fell on her knees by the bedside and prayed, as, indeed, at that juncture she had much cause to pray, for help to stand against the wiles of the enemy, and, having done all, to stand. For she was shocked to find that the bare thought of Mopsie and John Ducross not being married after all, gave her an unworthy little feeling of something that was not pain—

that was almost the contrary of pain. She hated herself for it, and it passed away, and she spoke of the time afterwards as "a season of much exercise," though no one ever knew how or why the exercise had come. Probably most other people would have had the same feeling, the only difference being that they would not have prayed about it at all.

Whilst Phebe knelt at her bedside, gaining the victory over the last little fibre of selfishness which ever crept into her heart in connection with John Ducross, Mopsie, with the daintiest of blue ribbons tied in amongst her rough curls, and the muslin frill so carefully arranged round her little white throat as to preclude remark, was hiding behind the big trail of ivy which half covered her lattice-window, watching and waiting, as those can only watch and wait who know the sweet unrest of a first

love. For she had her hopes, and she had her fears, and there was the pride of a whole long line of Iselworths in her young heart as she thought of what might be if that Indian letter should, as Miss Phebe said to herself, "make any difference."

Half-past six came, and then seven, and still no Mr. Ducross; and when they had waited so long for tea that the cakes would be quite spoilt if they waited any longer, Miss Maplethorpe came up to call her, and found her there with the tears quietly rolling down upon her holland frock.

"He knows all about it, and he won't come now," she said, with a pitiful attempt at defiance about the corners of her little mouth.

"Nonsense, child! I know John Ducross better than that. He has not come in and out of this house for nine months, and grown to be almost one of ourselves, for me to

think that of him. The train may be late, or there may be something wrong at the Grammar School, or his friend may be worse, or there may be heaps of things to keep him from coming at the exact time. Come down to tea now, and that will help us through another quarter of an hour."

Which last remark showed that Miss Maplethorpe, in spite of herself, *was* a little bit anxious.

But just then a black figure appeared in the distance, crossing the Abbey Close ; and when Mopsie had dashed away some tears, and Miss Maplethorpe had put on her spectacles, they both found out that it was the head-master.

"There he is. I told you so. Now wash your face and come down."

But Mopsie wouldn't do anything of the sort, though the sudden light upon her face

was, as Callis told John afterwards, almost the prettiest thing she had ever seen.

“No, I won’t. At least, not until you have been first, and told him everything. And be sure you tell him that I have only twenty pounds left, not a bit more than that. Promise me that you will tell him everything.”

With a smile upon her dear old face, Callis Maplethorpe promised, and went down.

It was all right. John had gone first to Mr. Randolph, to tell him about their engagement, and to ask his consent to their marriage. Mr. Randolph, of course, told him about the Indian letter, thinking that it might perhaps make a difference. When he found that it did nothing of the sort, he gave them both his blessing, and even privately told the head-master about his own prospects.

"And where is Mopsie?" he asked, after he had explained about being late.

"She was crying at her window until just now, because she thought you would not come. She said I was to tell you all about it first."

"Tell her to come out to me under the elm-tree," he said, and strode away into the garden. Callis said afterwards she was quite sure he looked very queer too, and gave a choking sort of cough as he went kicking the gravel before him all the way to the summer-house.

Mopsie stole down almost as silently and shyly as that other night, when she was called to receive her good-night kiss. And if, as John Ducross took her into his arms and called her a little goose, and all sorts of other bad names, the tears were still dropping from her eyelids, it was certainly not

because he had said that the relation between them was now "simply one of courtesy."

CHAPTER IX.

OF course the cakes were spoiled, because those two people would keep on talking to each other in the garden for ever so long, and Miss Maplethorpe would not have them disturbed. But probably no one enjoyed them the less, when at last, fully a couple of hours after the proper time, the little company did gather round the tea-table in the best parlour, Mopsie, the quietest of them all, with a glimmering brightness about her eyes which told that the tears would very much like to come if only they could have leave.

Miss Maplethorpe could have cried too,

only at her time of life people have more control over their feelings. She was so glad that everything had come right, and she was so sure that Mopsie would never have need to repent. And when, looking at the tremulously happy little face on the other side of the table, she felt too much of a tingling sensation under her eyelids, she was obliged to change the current of her thoughts by picturing how surprised Miss Maleveron would be when she heard that that most eligible situation of fifteen pounds a year would have to be offered to some one else. She had never liked Mrs. Maleveron very much, but she liked her less than ever after that heartless letter to the poor child whom she was so ready to cast out upon the world. And she judged Tantie correctly enough to know that Mopsie's prospects would be anything but a pleasant surprise when she discovered them.

As for Phebe, there was a new light upon her face—a light of perfect peace and content, since she had cast out the little creeping evil thought which stole so quietly into her heart. She had won more than she had looked for in that half hour of wrestling prayer. Not only had the temptation taken flight, but a strange triumph of content had come in its place, which made her able to rejoice in the happiness of the two lovers with a joy which was as pure and perfect as their own. In her heart now there was the clear shining after rain. She had never felt anything like it before in all the long years of those experiences which had been recorded, week by week, with such simplicity and earnestness amongst her sisters at the class-meeting. She was only able to say of it afterwards that the Lord had lifted up, in an especial manner, the light of His countenance upon her.

And John Ducross. But the happiness positively shone out of him, and made him look for once in his life almost handsome. And there was no need to hide it either, for they all understood each other now, and knew how things were going to be. And though Mopsie might turn aside with such shy, pretty wilfulness when he attempted to assume any of his lover-like rights, that only made it all the pleasanter to bring the flashing colour into her face, and tease her into bursts of delightful petulance, and almost make her quarrel with him, for the sake of feeling how much power he had over her.

Mopsie was in a very variable mood to-night, and to keep from letting anyone see how much she was really feeling, she had to turn everything into nonsense. And sometimes she pretended not to understand that there was any difference now, and sometimes she put on such demure little airs of

propriety, and sometimes she made believe to be so astonished when John asked her opinion about damask and china, as if *she* had anything to do, or was ever likely to have anything to do, with what he chose to have in his house, and passed on the question to Miss Maplethorpe with such a provoking air of unconcern; and yet sometimes, in the midst of it all, she would give him just one momentary glimpse through those blue eyes of what was really in her heart for him, that the poor fellow scarcely knew where or what he was. He only felt that he was a thousand times happier than ever he had been in his life before.

Then, after tea, Miss Maplethorpe, like a sensible woman, would not have the candles brought in, and, instead, they sat there in the window recess, and watched the big yellow full moon creep up behind the Abbey towers; and with the daylight Mopsie's wil-

fulness dropped away from her, and there came instead the tender unrest, full of longing and wondering, which steals, Undine-like, into every girl's heart, when, like Undine, she finds the true life begin to dawn within her.

How long they might have sat there, supremely happy, all four of them, but with nothing at all deserving the name of conversation stirring amongst them, nobody can tell; for after what seemed to John Ducross not much more than a quarter of an hour, though it was really about five times as much, a dainty step was heard on the gravel walk, and a soft low voice asked for Miss Maplethorpe, and Mopsie, springing from her foot-stool by the side of John Ducross, had scarcely time to deposit herself in a more appropriate situation, when Mrs. Maleveron, lady-like, persuasive, confiding as of yore, glided in with a smile for every-

one, and a kiss for Mrs. Darrell's future nursery-governess, which there, in the presence of witnesses, abated not one whit of its usual sweetness.

She had travelled all day, and reached the vicarage about half an hour before. Finding her brother, to whom she had not intimated the probable time of her arrival, absent at a committee meeting, she had refreshed herself with a glass of sherry, trimmed up her toilette a little, and set off at once to Miss Maplethorpe's cottage, there to tell Mopsie more fully the arrangements she had made for her, and to hurry on her preparations for starting to Chalford the following week.

"And to think of finding *you* here, Mr. Ducross!" she said, after all the other greetings had been duly distributed. "That is *such* a treat. Do you know, you disappointed Mrs. Darrell so about that little

Devonshire tour? She says she will never trust a man again. Now just think what you have done !”

John said, with a beaming countenance, not clearly discernible in the moonlight, that he was very sorry, but the Grammar School, &c.

“Oh, yes! I told poor Mrs. Darrell I was quite sure you would have come if you possibly could, but she did not get over it for ever so long. She had planned so many excursions for us to take together, and you know it is so delightful to be with some one who knows all about everything, as you do, Mr. Ducross.”

Mr. Ducross disclaimed the compliment, and Miss Maplethorpe asked if candles should be brought in.

“Oh! *please* no—at least, not for me. I do think this moonlight is so delicious, and I am really such a fright, after travelling all

day, that I should not wish even the light of a candle to shine upon me, under present circumstances." Mrs. Maleveron paused here, to give Mr. Ducross, or some one else, time to say that, under the most trying circumstances, it was impossible for *her* to look anything like a fright; but nobody made the remark, and she went on—"I felt as if I *must* come at once, dear Miss Maplethorpe, to tell you how very, very grateful I am for all your kindness to Mopsie. You don't know what a weight it lifted from my mind to have her in such good care. *Wasn't* it good of her now, Mr. Ducross, to keep my little pet such a long time?"

Mr. Ducross said, with unaffected earnestness, that it *was* indeed very good of Miss Maplethorpe. Of course it had made all the difference in the world to him, but he did not say that, and Mrs. Maleveron

could not see it in his face, on account of the candles not having been brought in. But she was astonished at the change in his voice and manner. There was nothing now of what she might almost call the old discourtesy about him. Doubtless he was pleased to see her back again, and that made the difference.

This conviction gave new sweetness to her own voice as she continued,

“And I do so *very* much hope, Mr. Ducross, that you have been kind to my poor old brother whilst I have been away. I assure you it made me quite miserable sometimes to think how lonely it must be for him in that big house, all by himself. I really at one time almost made up my mind to write and ask you myself if you would go in pretty often and have a cigar with him. Now I wonder if you would have been very, *very* much shocked if I *had* done anything so improper.”

“Not in the least,” said John, innocently, thinking that the impropriety referred to the smoking of the cigar, and not to the writing of the letter. “On the contrary, I should have thought it was very kind of you.”

Mrs. Maleveron smiled. Yes, he had evidently lost none of his old simplicity. Just the sort of man that a woman who knew what she was about might do anything with.

“Well, really ! now I feel quite sorry that I did not throw my scruples to the winds, and act upon my own impulses. Only—” and Mrs. Maleveron gave a gentle little sigh —“I have sometimes acted upon impulse, and then found I had made *such* a mistake. But I do hope, Mr. Ducross, that, even without my writing to ask you, you *did* go very often to see poor dear George. Do tell

me now that you often took pity upon him."

John was obliged to say, being a man who always spoke the truth, that he really had not been so very often to the vicarage during Mrs. Maleveron's absence, but that now—and there was quite a perceptible brightening in his whole voice and manner—he hoped to behave very much better in that respect. He should be only too happy to come as often as they would have him. Indeed, his fear was that they might find him too frequent a visitor.

"Oh, *dear*, no," said Mrs. Maleveron, putting her own interpretation upon this sudden desire for intimacy—"how *can* you say anything of the kind when you must know it is the very thing we should so much like? I am sure dear George will be so delighted if you will come over as often as possible, and be just like one of our-

selves. The *idea* of our ever being tired of an old friend like you !”

Could she have heard anything ? John thought. But no ; he had only spoken to Mr. Randolph about it for the first time an hour or two before, and then Mrs. Maleveron had not come home, and she said herself that she had not seen her brother. Unless he had had some idea all along of what was going to happen, and had given a gentle little hint by letter to his sister. If so, it was very nice of her to take this way of showing him her good will ; and the belief that she *was* thus showing him her good will, in the matter of the engagement, made John Ducross feel more pleasantly towards Mrs. Maleveron than he had done for many a long year.

“ And now,” she continued, turning to Miss Maplethorpe, after a little more of this agreeably-conducted misunderstanding, “ I

think it is really time for me to be going. You don't want me to run away with Mopsie at once, do you? because perhaps she may not be quite ready; but to-morrow morning—suppose I send over for her to-morrow morning—will that do?"

Miss Maplethorpe said, truly enough, that the longer they could keep her, the better they should be pleased. If Mrs. Maleveron could even spare her for a week or two.

"Ah! that is so kind of you. But, you know, the arrangements—there will be so many arrangements, Miss Maplethorpe," said Tantie, with a pleasant little air of mystery, which poor John thought he could quite understand as referring to the preparations for Mopsie's marriage. "I think I must say to-morrow, or, at any rate, *very* early on Monday morning. And oh, thank you so very, very much! I don't know *what* I should have done without you, for she is

such a careless little creature—are you not, Mopsie dear?”

Mopsie felt she could not deny it, so was silent.

“Though really, I declare, Miss Maplethorpe, you have already made quite a difference in her. I cannot think how you have managed to improve her so. But, oh dear!” And Mrs. Maleveron said this as if she had just thought of it, though in reality it had been in her mind all along, and that was why she did not propose to take Mopsie home with her at once. “Do you know, I was so stupid as to come away from the vicarage without leaving a message for my brother or any of the servants to fetch me? I *am* so sorry, but *could* you, dear Miss Maplethorpe, let your little maid go home with me? I am so foolishly nervous about being out alone. It was very stupid of me to forget.”

John Ducross, as in duty bound, offered his services, which was just what Mrs. Maleveron intended him to do. He offered them willingly, even eagerly, because he was so anxious for an opportunity to tell Mrs. Maleveron himself of the sweet new relationship which he could not but think from her manner she already suspected, and it was only showing proper respect to her, as the one who had had charge of Mopsie so long, to take the earliest opportunity of explaining his intentions, instead of leaving her to learn them from the vicar.

So, after courteous farewells, they sallied forth into the moonlight, John turning over in his own mind the best way of beginning the subject.

CHAPTER X.

HE found it more difficult than he expected, to make a beginning. Mentally he tried one opening after another, but could not hit upon anything that seemed to introduce the subject naturally enough. And this gave a shade of embarrassment to his manner. His replies to Mrs. Maleveron's little remarks were short, and sometimes so entirely wide of the mark, that she felt sure there was something on his mind.

She was not at all displeased. Indeed, that he should feel a little awkward at finding himself alone with her for the first time

since those old pleasant days, twelve years ago, when they were almost engaged to each other, was exactly what he ought to have felt ; and it gave her much more confidence in her power over him than she should have had if he had been perfectly equal to the situation. This silence and absence of mind showed that he was remembering the past, probably regretting it, wishing that it would come back again. Perhaps he was thinking how unkind she had been to him. She should like him to know that she felt it, too. So far as she was concerned, there was no reason why things should not be brought back to their old footing. Indeed, she would have brought him to the point twelve years before, if it had not been for that too fascinating German, though his prospects at that time were exceedingly uncertain, beetles and butterflies being a precarious taste for a man who had his living to get,

and not much to depend upon in the way of private property.

But now things were different. That head-mastership, she had heard her brother say, was worth at least eight hundred a year, and meant a position which would place the future Mrs. Ducross on a level with the best society of Broadminster. And then he was one of that easy-going, unobservant sort of men who would let a woman do just as she liked about money matters, so long as his study was never dusted, nor his different brands of cigars mixed up together. He would be as good as her brother George for that, and praise could go no further.

With admirable forethought Mrs. Maleveron tripped over a stone in the road.

“Will you take my arm?” said Mr. Ducross.

That was just what she intended when she saw the stone. With the cosiest air of in-

timacy, she put her daintily-gloved hand upon his coat-sleeve.

“Thank you very much. It was so stupid of me not to see it. I suppose I was too much taken up with my own thoughts.” And then, as Mr. Ducross shortened his heavy strides to keep pace with her little trimming footsteps, she said, “I see you remember my foolish way of always wanting some one to help me on. George has accustomed me so to have some one to depend upon that I am sure to get into trouble now if I am left to myself. Isn’t it foolish to be such a baby? But you know I cannot help it.”

And Mrs. Maleveron looked up to him with that pretty confiding expression which, twelve years ago, had well-nigh worked a great deal of mischief in his too impressible heart.

It did not work any mischief at all now.

Indeed, he scarcely noticed the glance, except to think how much pleasanter it would have been if Mopsie had been by his side to give it, instead of this elegant and well-appointed lady, who said and did everything with such charming propriety.

And then they walked on for awhile in silence, Mr. Ducross struggling ineffectually to find expression for that most important item of information—his engagement to Mopsie. Every sentence that he tried to put into shape seemed worse than the previous one which he had discarded for it. And if ever he did say anything which might lead up to the subject, Mrs. Maleveron never seemed to understand it properly. She replied with exquisite taste and feeling, but somehow not to the purpose.

They were now close to the gate which led into the back-garden of the vicarage, and as yet nothing had been accomplished.

"Shall we take the long road round to the front?" he said, in despair. "The—the moonlight is very pleasant, and if you are not tired. But don't let me if you would rather—that is, if it is at all inconvenient."

That again was just as Mrs. Maleveron would have it. Dear, awkward old fellow! He had not altered one bit. He was as ready as ever to be wound round anyone's finger—anyone, at least, who knew how to take him in the right way. Yes, she would humour him. As he was evidently so very anxious for it, he should come back to his old position, and she would treat him a little more carefully this time, suitors not being so numerous.

But she was far too wise to appear unduly ready to grant what he desired so much, more of her company alone in the moonlight. She looked up into his face

with a pretty mixture of coquettishness and confusion.

“Oh, charming! And it is such a *lovely* night. But I wonder—do you think George would be vexed about it? You know he is so *very* particular. I often tell him I might be a girl in my teens, and not *almost* a middle-aged woman.”

Here Mrs. Maleveron paused for her companion to protest against this quite too extreme stating of the case. But he did not protest at all, queer, absent-minded fellow that he was, and she went on with just a slightly more manifest pressure on his arm, not too much, lest he should think she was tired, and insist, in his carefulness of her, on taking her home at once.

“It is really quite ridiculous of him, but he knows I often *used* to get into mischief, and I suppose he has not learned to trust me. Still I think we might as well go

round by the long road to the front, and if he *should* be a little bit vexed with me, you will promise to make it all right for me, will you not? Now do promise, Mr. Ducross, to be good if he scolds me. Say it was not my fault, will you?"

John promised, and again there was a silence as he struggled after something that would in any way express his thoughts about Mopsie.

They had gone nearly round the Close, and five minutes more of even the most leisurely walking would bring them to the vicarage front door, when Mrs. Maleveron said, in a gentle, half timid voice,

"Do you know what I have been thinking all this time, Mr. Ducross?" Mr. Ducross said he did not. In truth, he had been far too busy with his own thoughts, to speculate as to what Mrs. Maleveron's might be. "Well, do you know? I am sure

you will not mind my saying it to you, but this *does* remind me so of the old days, when we used to have those delightful strolls in the dear Oxford gardens. Do you remember them? When you used to show me where to find those curious beetles and things, and sometimes Mopsie used to go with us to keep people from talking so much, you know, such an odd little creature as she was then; and once she said if I was Tantie, you must be uncle—such nonsense children do talk, don't they? It *did* make me feel so dreadfully awkward, though of course the poor little thing did not know what she was saying. And then those cosy afternoon teas, how pleasant they were, and the long chats with George in the study. Do you remember them, the dear old times, Mr. Ducross?"

Did Mr. Ducross remember them? Had he indeed thought of much else during the

past two months, except when he had been actually enjoying the sweeter present with Mopsie? For those old days were so mixed up with her. It had been so sweet to look back and remember her as she was then, the wild, wilful, untidy, affectionate little thing, always getting into trouble about rough hair or torn pinafores; sometimes passionate, proud, bursting into tears at a false accusation or an averted look, but so ready to forget when a kiss or a caress had made all right again. And with what pretty pleading looks she would come to ask him for stories, and how she would climb on his knee and tuck up her little feet and fold her hands and look into his face with such utter delight when he began for the hundredth time about the princess with wings, and the lady that lived in a well. And then when it came to living happily ever afterwards, she, knowing the end had

arrived, used to put up her rosy lips for a good-night kiss, and bundle contentedly off to bed. Dear little Mopsie ! And now she was all his own, his to tease, and kiss, and pet, and shelter, and take care of until death parted them. What wonder that there was a thrill of unwonted feeling in his voice as he said—

“Yes, indeed, I do remember the old times. I am never tired of thinking of them. They are dearer to me now than ever they were.”

That was almost as good as a declaration, Mrs. Maleveron thought, but she was not the woman to appear to take things too much for granted. Enough to be sure now that the rest would come in its own time.

“Ah ! that is so nice and kind of you,” she said, just putting up her chin in the old, pretty, child-like way. “I felt sure that

you could not really have forgotten, only I like to hear you say it. Should you mind taking *one* more turn round the Close? The air is so refreshing, after being shut up all day in that dreadful railway carriage. I don't think George could be vexed."

Mr. Ducross assented. He had very nearly begun about Mopsie, when Mrs. Maleveron put up her chin and interrupted him, but he thought now he should be able to manage it in the course of another turn, and then he should feel so relieved.

"It is *so* pleasant to renew our old acquaintance," said Mrs. Maleveron, as they came under the shadow of the old elm-trees, and she held out her little gloved hand to dabble in the moonlight which filtered through their leaves. "It makes me feel as if everything that had passed since then had been only a dream. It has been *such* a loss to me, never having you to talk to

all this time. You know you used to help me so beautifully. I could look up to you so entirely. But it was all my own fault. You know, I think it was some peculiarity in my nature then that I never could keep to one thing for long. You know I was just like a child. I used to tire directly."

Mr. Ducross thought she referred to the sudden cessation of her taste for beetles and butterflies. At least if she had any reference to anything else now, it did not trouble him, and he hoped she would not let it trouble her. But he really did think she was referring to the beetles, and he replied—

"Never mind. We often make more progress when we take up a thing later in life. Those boys of mine yonder will learn twice as much, with half the trouble, in ten years' time. It is not too late for you to begin, and I can help you again, just as I used to do."

"Oh! Mr. Ducross, you are *too* good. Then you do not forget the old times?"

"I can *never* forget them, Mrs. Maleveron."

There was more pathos in his voice than he knew of, as he said this, because Mrs. Maleveron had jerked back in such an unaccountable way from the beetles and butterflies to his associations with Mopsie's childhood. Surely she must have heard something, or she would not refer to it in that way.

But during the little silence which followed these words, they had come to the vicarage door.

"You will come again very soon, will you not?" Mrs. Maleveron said, as he rang the bell.

"Thank you," he replied. "I should like to come very soon, and very often, if you will let me."

"If I will let you," and the lady laughed her pretty coquettish little laugh, she felt that the ground was quite safe under her now; "you mean, if George will let you. This house is guarded almost as if a princess lived in it."

"I don't wonder at *that*," said John.

"Don't you, really? But I am sure he will be delighted for *you* to come as often as you like. Dear me! there is no light in his study. He cannot have come home yet, and I did so want to ask you in. I wonder if it would be very, very naughty if I were to ask you to wait for him now. I don't think he can be very long."

John, in despair of getting anything definite said, and thinking of the pleasant half-hour he had promised himself with Mopsie before he went back to the Grammar School, declined, but said, if Mrs. Maleveron would allow him, he would come

over first thing next morning before church.

“*What*, on Sunday! You *naughty* man! But never mind. I will be very good to you, and let you come whenever you like, and I daresay it would not be quite the thing just now. To-morrow, yes, to-morrow, I will be ready. And now, please don’t keep me talking to you any longer, or you do not know what a scolding George will give me.”

And with a playful wave of her hand, Mrs. Maleveron disappeared. It had been a very successful walk, very successful indeed.

“I shall get her told to-morrow morning, at any rate,” thought John Ducross, as he hurried back for Mopsie’s good-night kiss, “and then it will be all right. And yet I am sure she might have understood what I wanted.”

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. MALEVERON went into the dining-room, put aside her bonnet, ordered up tea and toast, and fell to thinking.

If she had been desired to arrange matters entirely for her own convenience, she could not have arranged them better than they were arranging themselves just now. After all, what a great deal a woman of sense and determination could do! Poor dear old John Ducross! He really must have been wonderfully fond of her, to have forgiven her for behaving so badly to him twelve years before, though of course if she

had known Von Strengel's fickleness she would never have taken up with *him* at all, and John might have come to the point whenever he liked.

Poor fellow! It said something for her own powers of attraction that she should be able to retain her hold over a man in that way.

And Mrs. Maleveron got up to look at herself in the glass. Yes, she was certainly a very well-preserved woman. Brunettes, as she said to herself, had a great deal the best of it when the first bloom of youth had passed, their style having a sort of twilight charm about it which gave softness and shadow to the departing years of a beauty which of course could not last for ever. Now the very peculiarity of blonde loveliness was that it gave one the idea of perpetual daylight, and so showed up all the little defects which, at forty, begin to need

such careful management if one would preserve the reputation of good looks ; whereas the tints of a brunette, though perhaps not so charming in girlhood, lent themselves more conveniently to the style and colours which were most adapted to produce an effect in—say, the noon of life.

Mrs. Maleveron sat down again.

This readiness to take up the old position was really almost too amusing, though, she must say, very flattering to herself. She could scarcely make even the most distant allusion to the old times without a change coming over his voice, which showed how tenderly he remembered them. So nice of him ! And when many men would have stood upon their dignity, and thought themselves so mightily injured by being set aside for some one richer and better-looking than themselves. But one could always get on so much better with these simple-hearted

men who had no conceit and no knowledge of the world. You might really, if you had the least tact and prudence, do what you liked with them.

And how fortunate that Mopsie was now so nicely provided for ! It would simplify matters so during the little time which might elapse before her own arrangements were completed. Because, if Mr. Ducross *did* press her to name an early time for their marriage, she should not oppose him. Of course she should not leave her brother's home now ; there would be no need for *that*, as he would be a protection to her in receiving Mr. Ducross's visits ; there was always a little difficulty about not having a head of the family under such circumstances, but Marian might reasonably have protested against two people in the house, and one of them likely to remain there for an indefinite time. Now, however, with Mopsie safely

disposed of down in Hampshire, everything would move as harmoniously as possible.

Mopsie might be very much obliged to her. It was not every girl, suddenly thrown upon her own resources, who had such a comfortable home provided for her. And the work she would have to do for Mrs. Darrell was exactly fitted to bring out the qualities in which she was most deficient; order, method, punctuality, and all that sort of thing. Indeed, if she had received no salary at all, it would have been worth anything to her to have got into such a situation, for the sake of the training. And most probably, after a year or two, if she conducted herself in such a way as to win the esteem of the family, some respectable young man would turn up and establish her in a home of her own. Things of that kind happened often enough, and Mopsie by that time would be rather a taking sort of girl.

Mrs. Maleveron was still congratulating herself on her admirable talent for managing her own affairs, and those of other people, when Mr. Randolph came home from his meeting.

“Rather surprised to see me, are you not, dear old boy?” she said, standing on tiptoe to give him a sisterly greeting. “But I was sure you would want no end of things doing for you, and so I thought I had better get back as soon as I could. And now let me congratulate you.” And Mrs. Maleveron gave him another kiss. “I am *so* glad, dear George! If you had told me to search all the world over for you, I could not have fixed upon anyone more suitable than dear Miss Granger, and I am sure I wish you both all the happiness you deserve.”

“Thank you, Isabel,” said Mr. Randolph, with a grave smile. He was not the sort of

man to be either shy or awkwardly delighted at this, the first family congratulation he had received. "Marian was much pleased with the kind manner in which you mentioned her. Of course she had a little natural doubt at first as to the way in which you might receive the intelligence."

"Oh! George, as if I could *ever* be anything but delighted at the prospect of anything which was likely to promote *your* happiness! You know I love you a great deal too well for that. I shall be positively charmed to see you settle down here, with some one who will be like a sister to me, and especially under present circumstances, you know."

"Yes," said Mr. Randolph, thinking that his sister referred to her probable loneliness when Mopsie had gone away. "I hope Marian will be a real comfort to you, as

well as a help-meet to myself, and a gain to the parish."

"Exactly so, George, you put it all so nicely. And now tell me about it. Have you really loved each other such a *very* long time? How funny! And for me never even to have suspected it, when I pride myself on being able to find out things directly. Only, of course, when we were at Oxford, I was having my own little triumphs, you know. But now do tell me all about it."

"Presently, Isabel, presently," said the vicar, putting on his slippers and looking round for his cigar-case. "But there are other changes I should like to discuss first. Of course you know that Mr. Ducross came to see me last night, to ask my consent to the proposed change in his own arrangements."

“What! so soon?” thought Mrs. Maleveron, triumphantly. Then he must have made up his mind whilst she was away in South Devon. So like the dear old fellow, to go and speak to her brother first, that there might be no misunderstanding. Mrs. Maleveron put out her chin coquettishly, and began playing with her pocket-handkerchief. It was really quite nice to have been able to bring him to the point so soon.

“Oh! he spoke to you, did he? He walked over with me from the cottage to-night, and kept me ever so long strolling about in the moonlight, until I told him I was afraid you would be quite angry with me; but I suppose he could not manage to get his feelings expressed. And then he asked me if he might come and speak to me to-morrow morning. Sunday of all days, fancy! Of course I told him he might, it seemed cruel to keep him in suspense.”

"Yes, because there is no mistake about the sincerity of his attachment."

"I suppose not. He is wonderfully forgiving, is he not, considering how shamefully I behaved to him twelve years ago? Did I not behave badly, George? But some men are so foolish, when they get an idea into their heads. You may treat them as you like, and yet they will come back to you."

"Ducross is a very good fellow," said Mr. Randolph, looking rather mystified. "The honourable way in which he kept to his original intention, when I informed him of the change which had taken place in Mopsie's prospects, made me respect him immensely. Not, of course, that a true man *would* have shrunk back in the least."

"Oh! dear, no, George. And, besides, you know, Mopsie's loss of property will not make the least difference to *us*."

"It will not, Isabel. I am glad you see that as I do. I would not for the world let it make a difference to her, poor child! during the little time that remains. Mr. Ducross spoke very feelingly of the loss we should sustain."

Mrs. Maleveron smiled gently. Well, yes, of course; her brother *would* miss her. And Miss Granger was a woman with not the least sort of style or presence about her, so different from herself.

"It will be his gain, I hope," she said. And then, leaning confidentially over to her brother, she continued, in rather a pathetic voice, "I shall really be *very* sorry to leave you, George. We have always got on so nicely together. These partings are very painful." And she put up her pocket-handkerchief.

"My dear Isabel, there is not the slightest necessity for you to leave me. I have not

contemplated anything of the sort," said her brother. "I am sure we can arrange matters very comfortably, especially since Mr. Ducross wishes the marriage to take place at such an early period. Do not distress yourself. He does not want to wait a day longer than is absolutely necessary."

Mrs. Maleveron put down her pocket-handkerchief.

Poor fellow! It was extraordinary what power she had over him. Really it made one feel like a girl again to be able to do what one liked with a man like that. No wonder the Saxelby ladies had so much to say about his not caring for their society. It was explained now. His heart had been somewhere else all the time. She put on a pretty little air of wilfulness as she replied,

"Oh! that is very fine, very fine indeed. But, George, he must not expect *me* to be in such a hurry. One must have a *little*

time, you know, to think about things."

"Exactly, Isabel, that is just what I was sure you would say. And so I suggested to him that perhaps it would be better to let it stand over for a little while, to give us all the opportunity, you know, of reflecting upon it, and making up our minds."

Mrs. Maleveron did not see that so plainly. Prudence was a good thing, but it might be carried too far, and her brother certainly had carried it a great deal too far when he suggested allowing her marriage to stand over. Just the very thing she meant it not to do, though of course one was bound to make a little show of feminine protest just at first, or people might think you were too ready to fall into their mouths like a ripe peach.

"Oh, dear me, George!" she said, bridling up a little, "I don't see that you need have gone so far as that. I know my own mind.

At least, I may be allowed to think so ; but you have such a ridiculous way of taking time over everything. One would think I was a perfect child. However——”

Mr. Randolph again felt mystified. What was his sister losing her temper about?

“Dear Isabel, you are a great deal too sensible for anyone to think anything of the sort. And I told Mr. Ducross that I was sure you would not for one moment stand in the way of Mopsie’s interests. If it were not for her youth——”

“Mopsie’s interests, indeed !” said Mrs. Maleveron, petulantly. “Whatever are you driving at, George? Are we never to hear about anything but Mopsie’s interests? You do bungle everything so ! I wish you would just leave me to settle my own affairs. But of course I shall see Mr. Ducross myself to-morrow morning.”

“Exactly so, Isabel ; don’t irritate your-

self. He said he should come at ten o'clock, so as to have time for an hour's conversation before church, and I will leave everything in your hands. I really thought you would have preferred a little delay under the circumstances, or I assure you I would not have suggested it. I had not the least intention of interfering in matters where, of course, the decision rests with yourself."

Mrs. Maleveron allowed herself to be calmed.

"And now, Isabel, as to your remaining with me after my marriage. Of course, now that Mopsie is so comfortably provided for."

"Yes, indeed, George, you may well say that; but it would never have been arranged so if I had not given myself no end of trouble. I am sure she may thank me, if she knows what gratitude is. The very situation for her, and scarcely anything in

the world to do, except mend the children's clothes of an evening, because, of course, they want no teaching from her yet."

"Oh! dear no, Isabel, no teaching, of course! And no mending either. I assure you the boys' linen is all attended to by a matron, paid for that purpose."

"A nursemaid, you mean, George; but when did you ever know a nursemaid who *would* set the tapes and buttons on? No; that will be the chief part of Mopsie's duties, when she has put them through their alphabet, and that sort of thing. And Mrs. Darrell promises to be a mother to her in every way."

"Mrs. Darrell? Isabel!" said the unfortunate George, thinking his sister must be losing her wits. "Why, what on earth has Mrs. Darrell to do with it? I never heard her name mentioned in connection with Mopsie, until this moment."

“No, George; because I did not think it worth while entering into particulars by letter, when I was coming home so soon. Of course you were not likely to understand me. I had forgotten that.” And Mrs. Maleveron spoke with an air of calm superiority which became her admirably. “I arranged everything with Mrs. Darrell the day before I came away—yesterday, in fact; only so much has happened that it seems much longer ago than that. Mopsie is to go at once to Chalford as Mrs. Darrell’s nursery-governess. I have got her a salary of fifteen pounds a year, and she is to look after the four children, and hear them say their hymns, and sing to them, and keep their clothes in order, and make herself generally useful. Nothing laborious, you see, and Mrs. Darrell promises to be a mother to her in every way, and make her just like an elder daughter in the house.

She is to go at once, as soon as her clothes can be made ready; next week, I hope; and very thankful she may be that such an opening has presented itself."

"Oh!"

And Mr. Randolph put his fingers together, and twirled his thumbs, as he sat there in the vicarage dining-room, with his feet on the fender. But then, when his sister made that arrangement, she had not known of Mopsie's engagement, which of course made all the difference. Now she would simply remain in his house, with Mrs. Maleveron, until the marriage took place, and as Mr. Ducross wished it to be so soon, her time would be quite taken up in making the necessary preparations.

He sat quietly for a little while, straightening up the whole affair in his own mind, and then said, in his quiet, grave manner,

"Well, yes, perhaps it would have been

very suitable for her, if she really had been obliged to go anywhere. But you know, Isabel, Mr. Ducross proposed to her last Wednesday, before any of us knew anything about the loss of her property. And when the news came, and I told him about it, he said, under the circumstances, he should like to make her his wife with the least possible delay. That is why he did not wish to lose even a day in consulting you about it. So I am afraid we shall have to write to Mrs. Darrell, and ask her to make other arrangements. Or else it might have been a very comfortable home for her."

CHAPTER XII.

SOME women, and notably those of the more selfish and managing sort, have a power of self-control which might be brought into action for more useful purposes than the hiding of their own failures. With her brother's last words, the whole situation revealed itself to Mrs. Maleveron. She understood now John Ducross's change of manner, his frequent allusions to the old times, his grateful acceptance of her offers of future intimacy, his readiness to forgive former affronts, his efforts to assure her that no ill-will lingered in his thoughts of her.

All was plain enough. The most provoking part was that she herself had been such a simpleton as not to see it from the beginning.

Mopsie was to be the wife of the headmaster of Low Saxelby Grammar School, with eight hundred a year to do as she liked with, and perhaps an archdeaconry or a deanery, or even something better than either in store; for everyone said the attainments of Mr. Ducross marked him out for eminence.

“And herself?”

That was a matter that would have to be thought about.

But Mrs. Maleveron did not suffer a tone of her voice, or a hair of her eyebrows to disarrange itself. It was quite natural that there should be a short pause after Mr. Randolph's lucid statement of the case—a pause in which to consider how Mrs.

Darrell's inevitable disappointment might best be softened. Calmly, quietly, as if for the last five minutes she had been dealing with that subject, and with that only, she replied,

"Well, of course, if Mr. Ducross wishes the marriage to take place so soon, all I can do is to write at once to Mrs. Darrell, and tell her how exceedingly sorry I am to oblige her to make other arrangements. It will be a great nuisance to her, but, as you say, Mopsie must begin her preparations at once."

This was well done. It not only hid from her brother what a simpleton she had been, but it hid from him the humiliating fact that neither Miss Maplethorpe, Mopsie, nor John Ducross had told her of the engagement, or asked her opinion about it.

"Though I should have thought, George,

that, if she had had the least spark of independence about her, she would have been only too glad to do something to earn her own living, instead of coming back to be a burden to you."

"And so she did, Isabel," said Mr. Randolph. "I assure you she has acted with a great deal of spirit and determination. The Miss Maplethorpes are anxious to keep her with them, and she is to keep them with that net-work, something they do for the people at Broadminster, you know."

"Yes, I know; sprigging at eighteenpence a yard. Well, George, if you like anyone belonging to you to be mixed up with shop-keeping in that sort of way, I have nothing to say against it."

"My dear Isabel, it was Mopsie's own wish, and there is no one in Saxelby who stands higher in my esteem than the two Miss Maplethorpes."

"And one of them a Dissenter!" said Isabel, with a curl of her lovely lip.

"Yes; that is a pity, I allow. But Miss Phebe dissents from nothing that is vital in our church; and I am ashamed to own that I am only now beginning to see what I ought to have found out long ago—that we have not a monopoly either of religion, good breeding, or good sense in our own ranks. Miss Phebe Maplethorpe is quite a lady."

"And gets up starch clothes like a washer-woman, and sits under an elm-tree reading her Bible," said Mrs. Maleveron, whose bitterness must have a vent somehow. "I declare the whole place reeks with soap-suds and piety."

"That is not to the point, Isabel. We were talking about Mopsie. If you would prefer her coming here, I told her she was to consider my house her home, as it has always been."

"Well, really, George, when I have had a little more time to look about me, I shall perhaps be able to say more definitely *what* I prefer. At present I am feeling rather knocked up with my journey, and I think I will say good night."

"Good night, then, Isabel. I might have remembered that you must be tired, though you always look so remarkably well and lively. You are a great contrast to Marian, who shows fatigue in a moment."

Rather pacified by this implied compliment to her looks, Mrs. Maleveron retired to her own room. There she did allow herself to stamp her little feet, and knit her delicate eyebrows in a way which would have been slightly bewildering to those who were accustomed to look upon the vicar's sister as one of the most agreeable women in the world, so charmingly easy and graceful, and with such exquisite manners.

Not that disappointed love had anything to do with it. She was quite superior to any nonsense of that sort. There were at least five and twenty men in the circle of her acquaintance, any one of whom she would just as soon have married, if he had happened to ask her. And indeed, if she had had plenty of money, and if matrimony had not been one way amongst others of getting on in the world, she would never have troubled herself to marry at all. Position, establishment, consideration; these were the things she wanted, not anyone to love and care for her, still less anyone who would require from herself those little duties and ministrations which are supposed to make the happiness of many women's lives. The late Mr. Maleveron, though no doubt very proud of the appearance his wife had been able to make in Indian society, had probably had less experience of those pretty

confiding ways of hers than anybody else ; and as for wanting caring for and watching over, he had found her, on the contrary, a woman admirably qualified to take care of herself. That qualification she had never lost.

But that Mopsie, that child of rough hair, torn frocks, and spotted pinafores, should aspire to such a position as being wife of the head-master of Saxelby Grammar School—Mrs. Maleveron could not have given the girl credit for so much scheming. No doubt those old frumps, the two Miss Maplethorpes, had had something to do with it. Women were so fond of match-making. Most likely they had set their own caps in turn at Mr. Ducross, and finding that that was of no use, had put Mopsie into his way, to see if anything could be done in that direction, the sly, designing, net-sprigging creatures !

Of course it would be a very fine thing for them, now that they had got hold of her so completely, to have her make a good marriage like that. It would be next door to as good as getting married themselves, because, when she was settled in a house of her own, they could go and live at her expense for a day or two whenever board ran short at their own home, which, if people said true, was not unfrequently the case. Such meanness and self-seeking! And to hide it all under the appearance of piety, as both of them did, Miss Phebe in particular! But some people had that sort of thing in their very natures.

Was she to fold her hands, then, and let things go as they liked, or rather, as the two Miss Maplethorpes liked? She should rather think not.

Mrs. Maleveron, after walking up and down for awhile, seated herself in a low

chair, and crossed her feet, and leaned her soft creamy cheek upon her hand, and remained in that position for upwards of an hour—in fact, until all the household had gone to bed. One could not decide at once what was the best thing to do. One had to look at various plans, considering in each of them how one's own interests could best be served, how one's own reputation for sweet unselfishness might be brought out in the strongest light, how one could avail oneself best of one's friends, whilst at the same time disliking them as much as was consistent with the Prayer-book ; how, in short, life could be made most comfortable under entirely new and unexpected conditions.

When Mrs. Maleveron had decided all that, she let down her hair, unpacked her clothes, said her prayers—a thing she never missed, come what might—and went to bed.

CHAPTER XIII.

JOHN DUCROSS came punctually next morning at ten. When there was anything to be done, he went through it like clockwork. No one, having made an engagement with him, need be in two minds as to whether he would keep it.

Mrs. Maleveron received him in a manner decided upon the night before.

She had an assortment of manners, answering to the different kinds of wedding silks one sees in the fashionable shops at the West-End. There was the white *glacé* of ordinary pleasantness, smooth, finely fin-

ished, agreeably alternated with light and shade, at seven-and-sixpence a yard ; there was the soft, vapoury muslin of playfulness, cheap and very fascinating at the price, not so effective as the *glacé*, after wearing a few times, but irresistible when new out of the shop. That, being inexpensive, was worn on ordinary occasions. Then there was the ivory satin of subdued and slightly grieved feeling, exquisitely soft and smooth, but somewhat difficult to arrange, and, therefore, rather costly. However, it was worth the price, for no one could resist it, especially with a drapery of damassie answering in tint, but just brocaded with silk, a touch of coquetry thrown gracefully over it, after the first impression of sensibility had been produced. For every-day wear there were cheap silks at so much the dress, which could be put on without care, forethought, or fitting ; but as this was not an every-day

occasion, Mrs. Maleveron passed them by, and chose the ivory satin, which no one could touch without giving way at once.

It fitted her without a crease or a wrinkle. No Court dressmaker in emotional costumes could have done the thing more perfectly. And then there was the damassie drapery to be thrown effectively over when opportunity required.

Clasping her hands and putting them slightly forward in front, Mrs. Maleveron, half smiling, half tearful, but wholly sweet and graceful, came into the drawing-room, where John Ducross had been walking up and down for the last five minutes, saying over and over to himself the exact words in which he meant to clothe his intentions with regard to Mopsie.

“ Ah! Mr. Ducross, you naughty, *naughty* man, I know what you have come for. You need not begin to tell me. You have

come to take away from me my one little pet-lamb, my dear little Mopsie, the only one in all the world that I really feel does belong to me. Ah! how *could* you?"

This was a great relief, inasmuch as it saved the necessity of the speech, and speeches learned by heart have a way of falling flat when delivered. But it placed John Ducross at a disadvantage in another way, for it was such an unexpected turning of the subject that he did not in the least know what to reply. He stammered out something very feeble and ineffectual about hoping to make Mopsie's life so pleasant that Mrs. Maleveron, seeing her happiness, would feel compensated for the loss which he knew only too well she would sustain in the departure of such a little sunbeam.

"Ah! yes," and Mrs. Maleveron smiled the smile of a woman who is prepared to sacrifice her dearest interests at the bidding

of duty, "I know you will make her the very best and kindest husband in the world, and I am sure she ought to think herself a most fortunate girl; but that does not make it any better for *me*, so lonely, so dreadfully lonely as I shall be when you have taken her away from me. But you are not in a very great hurry, I hope."

Mr. Ducross felt himself obliged to say, as every true lover probably would, under the circumstances, that he *was* in a great hurry.

"Then I am afraid," and Mrs. Maleveron smiled the sweetest smile, "that you will have to be just a little bit disappointed, because, you know, Mopsie is such a child, and has such vague ideas about the duties which belong to the mistress of a house, that you would be exposing both her and yourself to a great deal of discomfort by placing her in such a position just at pres-

ent. Now, you know, I have a great deal better plan. I propose that she should spend six months, or perhaps a year, in acquiring a knowledge of practical matters, and then, Mr. Ducross, don't you think that *then* it will be time enough for her to think about being married?"

It was certainly a common-sense idea, as Mrs. Maleveron put it. John Ducross, not being ready of speech, could not find anything to say just at the moment, and the wily lady went on,

"Such a mere child, you know, and understands nothing in the world about management. I daresay, indeed, I am *sure* it was very naughty of me never to have taught her anything, but then I liked to feel that she *was* a child, and I wanted to keep her so as long as I could. There is nothing in the world so unpleasant as to see girls grown-up women before their time. Of

course, if I had known, I would never have allowed her to remain in such ignorance, but I could not foresee it, could I now, Mr. Ducross? I can only make the best of things as they are."

"And they are not so very bad," replied the head-master, assuringly, not doubting that Mrs. Maleveron really was concerned about Mopsie's want of domestic experience. "Miss Maplethorpe has taken a great deal of trouble with her whilst she has been staying there, and she says it is wonderful how quickly she learns. And then, you know, that sort of thing somehow comes naturally to a girl, does it not?"

"Oh! *dear*, no," said Mrs. Maleveron, blessing his ignorance. "I assure you it takes a *very* long time to give anyone a proper insight into household affairs, and especially anyone so careless and volatile as our dear little Mopsie. I would have tried

to teach her somehow or other, now that there is a probability of her so soon settling in life, but really, you know, I am such a complete child myself in all matters of that kind that I am afraid it would be a case of the blind leading the blind. Just fancy *me*, now, with an apron on and my sleeves tucked up. Wouldn't it be simply ridiculous?"

John was obliged to admit that it would.

"Yes, I was sure you would say so. It is not my vocation. And so, as Mopsie *must* be taught, and I cannot teach her myself, I have made an arrangement which I am sure you will say is the wisest and best in the world; indeed, the only wonder is that anything so wise could have entered into my poor little head. I have really decided to part with her for a few months to some one who is experienced in household matters, so that she may be taught

everything that is proper. Now *don't* you think that is a most brilliant idea?"

John thought that if the "some one" was Miss Maplethorpe it *was* a very brilliant idea, but he would not commit himself to an opinion until Mrs. Maleveron had gone further into the matter. Had she anyone in prospect?

"Oh, dear, yes! I have settled it all as nicely as can be. You know Mrs. Darrell, down in Hampshire, where I have just been staying. She has three or four of the sweetest, loveliest, best-tempered children in the world, and she *does* so want a nice girl to be a sort of elder daughter to her, and help to amuse them sometimes, and I told her Mopsie would be just the very one, and she promises to be quite a mother to her, and to teach her *everything*, and, you know, dear Mrs. Darrell is one of the most *perfect* housekeepers, weighs out everything,

and knows exactly how things ought to be done ; really, I used to be so *ashamed* of myself when I saw her managing her house so beautifully. I would give anything in the *world* to be able to do that sort of thing myself. And I asked her if she would, as a *very* great favour, you know, take Mopsie for a few months and teach her, because I was so perfectly ignorant of anything domestic myself. And she was *so* kind. She said in a moment that she would only be *too* glad to do it. Was it not *really* good of her ?”

“Very good indeed,” said John, determined to knock that on the head at any rate, “but there is not the least need for her to go so far away from home. Miss Mapletorpe wants Mopsie to go and stay with her for six months, and she says she will teach her everything.”

Mrs. Maleveron smiled pityingly.

“You dear ignorant man! As if Miss Maplethorpe’s *everything* could be worth very much. Of course, if Mopsie was going to marry a nice respectable green-grocer, and live in a parlour behind the shop, and keep a girl to do the rough work, there could not be anything more suitable than for her to go to the cottage and learn how to adapt herself to her circumstances; but I presume your wife will move in a sphere where a little more than *that* will be required of her. Just consider, now.”

“I don’t think, Mrs. Maleveron,” John replied, “I should care for Mopsie to know any more than Miss Maplethorpe can teach her. If she only knows as much, she will know how to be a true woman and a perfect lady, and that is all I want. You are very kind to have taken so much trouble about it, and I am sure I am very much obliged to you, but Mopsie need not go so

far as Hampshire to learn how to be a good wife."

"You obstinate creature!" Mrs. Maleveron thought it was time now to throw the damassie of playfulness over the rest of the costume which had not produced the desired effect. Shaking her head with a pretty little pretence of impatience, she said, "You have not changed one bit since I knew you twelve years ago. What trouble George and I used to have with you in those days to make you do anything that was reasonable, and you are exactly the same now. I won't reason with you. Indeed I can't reason with anyone, I am such a little stupid. I only know what is the most sensible thing to do, sometimes, and I wish I could make you know it, too. Now please go away, or you will make me late for church. If I had known how tiresome you would be, I would never have let you

come to me this morning at all, for I declare you have put me quite in a bad temper, naughty man that you are. I will talk it over with my brother to-morrow, and tell you what he says, and if he thinks that I have gone too far with Mrs. Darrell to draw back—— I am sure you would not like me to do anything dishonourable, would you?"

"Not for the world, Mrs. Maleveron," said John Ducross, looking at his watch, and finding that it was time to go back to his Grammar School for the boys' service. "And now good morning, I have no doubt we shall be able to make it all square and comfortable."

And away he went, feeling a great load off his mind, since he had plainly stated his intentions with regard to Mopsie.

Mrs. Maleveron smiled to herself when he was gone. Six months at the cottage with

those scheming Miss Maplethorpes, who would take very good care that nothing happened to disturb matters between the two lovers. She was not going to be so foolish as to allow anything of the kind. Instead of going to church, she sat down and wrote a very pretty note to Mopsie, to say that she felt herself too much fatigued by her journey to go over and see her during the day, but that she should like her to return very early on the following morning, in order to make her preparations for going down into Hampshire. She had been talking matters over with her brother, and they both agreed that it would be unlady-like to draw back, now that things had gone so far; but that if dear Mopsie was not perfectly comfortable, or if she found the duties too heavy for her, or if in any way she felt herself unable to settle, she was to write at once and say so, as Mrs. Darrell

could not insist on keeping her longer than three months. However, under the circumstances, Tantie thought she must try to make up her mind to it for *three* months.

Then Mrs. Maleveron wrote an equally pretty note to Mrs. Darrell, saying that all the arrangements were now made, and that Mopsie would start for Chalford by the end of the week, at the latest.

That done, Mrs. Maleveron composed herself to sleep, not having rested well the night before. But first she congratulated herself on having managed everything so cleverly. For she would give Mrs. Darrell, who was a wise woman, a gentle little hint about it, and probably by the time Mopsie had been a month or two at Chalford, she would have seen some one more to her fancy than this Mr. Ducross, who was old enough to be her father. She could not care very much for him. She was at that age when one man

is as good as another ; and probably, if a handsome lover turned up, full of pleasant little flatteries and attentions, this middle-aged cavalier would be easily forgotten, and she would come back prepared to be kind to him as a friend, but nothing more than that. The best thing, decidedly the best thing, for the disparity in years was something too ridiculous.

Of course Mr. Ducross would feel it very much at first, but after a little while——

Mrs. Maleveron thought she could guess pretty accurately what would happen after a little while.

CHAPTER XIV.

MOPSIE had all day to think about her letter, and in the evening John Ducross came, as was his wont, after church, and carried her off to the summer-house under the elm-tree. They had only had one quiet time together since the Thoroldsby day, and that was when John came home, the evening before, and then there was so much else to say that Mopsie had never even thought of showing him the letter which Mrs. Maleveron had written from Chalford.

Now it was produced, somewhat crumpled

and soiled, for the impatient little woman had never been able to read it through yet without either giving it a twitch, or flinging it away somewhere; and as it had been read and discoursed over several times, privately, by herself and Miss Maplethorpe, it was getting decidedly the worse for wear.

“ Did Tantie really write this from Chal-ford ?” said John, as they sat there in the summer-house, Mopsie employing herself by pulling out little bits of dry heather from the thatch, and breaking them into equal lengths, and making letters of them, after the Kindergarten system.

“ Yes. It was after I had told her about the indigo plantation having gone to nothing. You know it was very natural she should think I ought to do something for my own living.”

“ And what does this first part of it mean,

about not referring to the beginning of your letter?"

"Oh!" said Mopsie, bending all her energies towards making an *M* upon the cover of her Prayer-book, which acted as a table, "that was nothing particular. It only belonged to something in the other letter."

It was the little bit about Mr. Burrowby Atcherley, and Mopsie was very much afraid of being cross-questioned about it.

"I can't get any farther than the *M*," she said. "These dry bits of heather *won't* twist round into an *O*. Now Tantie's was a very nice name. I could do every bit of it in capitals with just straight stalks. I know what I'll do. I'll get the stem of a white narcissus, and tear it down in very narrow strips, and they will curl round of their own accord, and make any quantity of *O's*."

Off she went, and came back with a lovely blossom, which, after she had cut as much stalk as she wanted, Mr. Ducross insisted upon putting into her hair. Of course that took a long time, and by the time it was done to his satisfaction, the first part of Mrs. Maleveron's letter was conveniently forgotten.

"Now, please," said Mopsie, "go on with what Tantie says about me. I don't want to hear it again, thank you, so you can read it to yourself."

Mr. Ducross did so, not without a little surprise at the quite new light which the letter shed on Mrs. Maleveron's character. Only one thing puzzled him. It had been written before she knew of Mopsie's engagement, and she had evidently made up her mind that the girl should earn her own living, though she did not seem to feel any such regret at the prospect of sending her

to a distance for that purpose, as she expressed to him in the morning, when he only proposed taking her to a home of her own in Saxelby, where they could meet whenever they liked. That pathetic little speech then about the pet lamb might be set aside as irrelevant. Indeed, John was beginning to think that a great deal of Mrs. Maleveron's interesting pathos might be set aside in the same way. But then, as she was so determined not to burden herself with any responsibilities in connection with Mopsie, why should she try to throw any obstacles in the way of a speedy marriage, which would at once relieve her from all those responsibilities, and relieve her, too, in a perfectly honourable and natural way?

She was a problem. John read the letter over two or three times, whilst Mopsie was busying herself in arranging the letters on the back of her Prayer-book, and

the more he read it, the more unintelligible did Mrs. Maleveron's line of conduct appear in desiring the marriage to be put off. Being a simple, straightforward man himself, he naturally expected the same qualities in other people ; but nothing could be less straightforward than this letter, read in the light of his own conversations with the lady who had written it.

"Well, Mopsie, what do you mean to do?" he said at last.

"I don't mean to do anything," said Mopsie, quietly.

The child had plenty of determination about her, which had hitherto shown itself chiefly in refusing to let herself be squeezed into the approved groove of young ladyhood, as proposed by Mrs. Maleveron. Now it was coming to the surface in another and more practical way.

"Miss Maplethope says that I may stay

with her, and I shall earn some money by working that net which she makes for the Broadminster shops. Nobody else here does it, and I have heard her say that she could make a great deal more if she had a quick girl to help her. So I am going to be the quick girl, and then Miss Phebe will show me all about housekeeping and dusting, and washing and making cakes, and different sorts of things that I ought to know. Unless——” And Mopsie looked roguishly up into his face. “Unless you would *very* much like Mrs. Darrell to be *quite* a mother to me. Would you like her to be quite a mother to me, at fifteen pounds a year?”

John answered that in his own fashion. And in the process, all poor Mopsie's name, which she had been constructing so carefully in little bits of dry heather, got spilt upon the ground.

"That's all your name is good for," he said, as he took possession of both her hands to keep her from employing them in such fruitless labour again ; "and now tell me, Mopsie, is it really true what Tantie says about the relation between you being simply one of courtesy ? I thought she was your guardian, with authority to arrange things for you so long as you are under age."

"So did I ; but, you see, she says she is not, and I suppose she knows best."

"I hope she does. If she is right, we are all right too, and I shall know exactly how to go on. Mrs. Maleveron cannot, in that case, compel you to go anywhere against the better judgment of your other friends. And now tell me, little one, how long will it be before you can get your frocks ready ?"

For this was the irreverent way in which the head-master of Saxelby Grammar School,

who ought to have known better, spoke of that mysterious entity, a bride's *corbeille*.

"A very long time indeed," said Mopsie, mischievously, "if you are going to keep fast hold of my hands like this. And then, you know, there is the money to earn, and the housekeeping to learn, and it *does* take such a long time to count the threads and darn the patterns in. I do really think, Mr. Ducross."

But he had dropped her hands and was sitting with a mock gravity which Mopsie took for genuine, looking away across the little garden and the meadows to the sleepy Saxel river beyond them.

"Mr. Ducross."

No answer.

Mopsie gave his coat a pull, but there might have been a statue inside it for any response that was made.

"Now, Mr. Ducross, listen to me. Where

have you gone? Why don't you look, or speak, or do something?"

"*Mr. Ducross* is over yonder at the Grammar School, looking at his watch to see if it is not almost time to begin to read prayers. If you happened to have anything to say to John now, perhaps that might make a difference."

The rosy colour flushed over Mopsie's face, and she looked so pretty and conscious as she shyly whispered the name which was to be best and nearest all through life.

"There," said John, as he kissed her. "I hope we have done with *Mr. Ducross*. I'm sure I don't want to hear any more of him, from you, at any rate. Now tell me what it was going to be."

But before she could do that, Miss Maples-
thorpe, with judicious preliminary coughings
and rustlings, came towards the summer-
house, bringing a note which had just

arrived for her from Mrs. Maleveron. It was to beg her to hurry Mopsie's return as much as possible, since Mrs. Darrell was so exceedingly anxious for her presence at Chalford by the end of the week, at the very latest."

"I don't think I shall go back to Tantie at all," said Mopsie. "Why need I, when I have made up my mind that Mrs. Darrell is not to be a mother to me?"

But Miss Maplethorpe was inflexible on this point, that no discourtesy should be shown to Mrs. Maleveron.

"You *must* go, Mopsie. I will not have you do anything that can be construed into offence. The very first thing to-morrow morning you and I and Mr. Ducross will set off to the vicarage, and you shall tell Tantie what you intend to do; and then you shall come back here with me and stay as long as ever you like. And now, Mr.

Ducross, I think it must be time those boys had prayers."

John, laughing, took the hint and departed.

Early next morning they all went to Mrs. Maleveron, who received them with the ivory-satin courtesy which she had put on for Mr. Ducross the morning before. She was anxious, if possible, to get everything arranged without coming into painful collision with anyone, since painful collision would have injured her own interests; but still for those interests Mopsie must go, and the sooner the better.

"So delighted to see you, my pet. You know, I did fancy"—with the daintiest little accent of reproach—"that you would perhaps have come over yesterday to inquire after me."

"Oh! I am so sorry," said Mopsie; "I *do* wish I had thought about it. But you did

not look the smallest bit tired when you came on Saturday."

"No, darling, but it would have been a nice little attention. However, you know, I am not exacting, and I am delighted to see you now, though unfortunately for me——" And here Mrs. Maleveron turned with a sweet smile to the head-master. "Unfortunately for me, it is only for such a little time. You know Mrs. Darrell is so anxious for her to go down there as early as possible, on account of the children being so troublesome. She does so want some one to help her, and for old acquaintance sake I am sure dear Mopsie will not draw back. I have said that for three months, at any rate—and poor Mrs. Darrell in such delicate health——"

"It would be very nice for Mrs. Darrell, no doubt," said Mr. Ducross, who knew what he was about now, and had no hesita-

tion in using plain-speaking. "But I understood, Mrs. Maleveron, that this arrangement was made when you wished to prevent Mopsie from being a burden to you, and of course now, as that is not likely to be the case, there is no necessity for her to be sent away at all. We have therefore decided that she shall remain with Miss Maplethorpe, as you tell her that she has no further claim upon you."

Mrs. Maleveron began to feel the ground of her position crumbling under her with these words, spoken in such a cold, business-like way, and implying clearly enough that the head-master had seen the letter which she addressed to Mopsie from Chalford. What a pity, as things had turned out, that she had ever written that letter. It only served now to injure her cause, since, as there appeared to be strong opposition to the Mrs. Darrell scheme, she could no longer, with

any show of consistency, object to Mopsie's remaining with Miss Maplethorpe. Now, if she had only let things stand over a few days, after hearing of the loss of the Indian property, all might have been so much more comfortable. The new object which had become necessary, getting Mopsie away from Saxelby, might have been accomplished in some other way, and Mr. Ducross would have been left to her own disposal. Now she had exposed herself to him, at least so far as her feelings towards Mopsie were concerned, and he was evidently standing on the defensive. It was a great nuisance.

Mrs. Maleveron, anxious to preserve, if possible, the ivory-satin demeanour which best became her style of beauty, rapidly ran over in her own mind the various lines of defence which were still possible to her. Nothing could be gained by losing her temper, therefore she must not lose it, though

all the bad passions prayed against in the Litany were tearing about undisturbed within her, hatred and malice chief amongst them. Supposing the worst came to the worst, supposing she was obliged to let Mopsie remain with Miss Maplethorpe until her marriage, that is to say, if the marriage could not by any means be frustrated, why, then the most remunerative line she could take would be that of gentle, if slightly dignified, acquiescence. If she could not be Mrs. Ducross herself—though of that she was not quite certain yet—she must then do her best to remain on good terms with the chit of a girl who seemed likely at present to achieve that distinction; because the more pleasant homes one had in the circle of one's acquaintance the better.

Assuming an air of pained surprise at the changed tone adopted by Mr. Ducross, she replied,

"No further claim upon me? Why, my dear Mr. Ducross, what can you possibly mean? Upon whom *could* dear Mopsie have any claim, if not upon me, who have provided for her ever since she was a baby? You must be labouring under some strange delusion. What *can* have led you to think that I would ever withdraw from duties so sacred?"

"Only the letter which you wrote to Mopsie, Mrs. Maleveron," said Mr. Ducross, a little staggered at the cool manner in which that lady disclaimed her selfishness, "I am very glad if I am labouring under a delusion, but certainly you say plainly enough there, that it is not your duty to provide for her any longer, and so you propose sending her to Mrs. Darrell, to earn a living for herself."

Mrs. Maleveron leaned back and put up her handkerchief to wipe away an imaginary

tear or two from her soft brown eyes.

“Ah! Mr. Ducross, I must own it was *very* wrong of me, and I have been *so* sorry ever since. But if you only knew what a great deal I had to think about when I was writing that letter, and no one to help or advise me in the least, and such a poor weak creature as I am when I really have to depend upon myself, I am sure you would be able to understand. Mopsie, darling—” and with a gentle smile Mrs. Maleveron turned towards a certain little brown curly head which had been hiding in a dark corner of the room—“*you* don’t think, Mopsie darling, that poor Tantie is such a wretch as not to want to have you any more, now do you?”

Mopsie, having a strong suspicion that such really was the case, but not liking under the circumstances to say so, and yet feeling somehow or other that she ought to

do something, came up to Mrs. Maleveron, who was holding out her arms, and having been tellingly embraced in the same, said,

“ Oh ! Tantie, I’m sure nobody thinks you’re a wretch. It would be very naughty to think that. And if you do want me *very* much to come back and stay with you, I am sure I will.”

But that was the very last thing Mrs. Maleveron wanted, and the hundred and fifty pounds a year not forthcoming. With the sweetest air of resignation she put aside a proposal which would have been in the highest degree inconvenient; because why should *she* have all the trouble of the wedding? No; after her brother’s marriage, if she could do nothing better for herself in the meantime, she should go and stay with her friends for a few weeks, so as to be out of the way of needlework and possible expenses attendant upon an outfit.

"No, Mopsie darling, I am quite content. I think, all things considered, you will be very happy with dear Miss Maplethorpe, if Mr. Ducross has really made up his mind that we must disappoint Mrs. Darrell. Of course she *will* feel it very much, and so shall I, though I hope we love each other too much for it to make a lasting breach between us. Perhaps Mr. Ducross will be so kind as to write himself and explain why we have been obliged to behave so badly. Will you now, Mr. Ducross?"

John promised with the greatest readiness. Mrs. Maleveron's behaviour puzzled him more and more, but since she was willing to see things in such a sensible light, he could desire nothing further. So he made a move to go.

"So soon? Well, yes, I suppose you have a great many things to attend to, after being away last week. So grieved to hear

of the anxiety you have had ; it is so dreadful to be summoned in that way, but I hope your poor friend is all right again now. And *do* tell me, now, that you understand everything. *Don't* go away thinking that I am a wretch, or anything of that sort."

Mr. Ducross assured her that nothing of the kind was passing through his mind. Indeed he was beginning to think that Mrs. Maleveron was a very pleasant and agreeable woman, and that great excuse must be made for a letter written under the pressure of ill-health and fatigue and anxiety, such as she must have been going through just at that time. He could really almost have been angry with himself for ever cherishing an uncharitable thought against her.

Mrs. Maleveron, shaking hands with him and looking keenly into his face, saw that things were coming right again. What a possession it was to have the art of twisting

people round your fingers so! And then, with a kindly good morning to Miss Mapletorpe, of whom she had scarcely taken any notice all the time, the important interview was over.

CHAPTER XV.

MOPSIE stayed behind to make some arrangements which were necessary before taking up her abode with Miss Maplethorpe for an indefinite period ; and whilst she was away in her own room, looking over her little possessions, Mrs. Maleveron did some more thinking.

She had been defeated, but one may make the best even of a defeat ; and in order to gain all the advantage which was to be gained out of this special defeat, she must be as kind and pleasant and conciliating as possible to Mopsie and Mr. Ducross,

and even to the two Miss Maplethorpes ; because, unless she was pleasant with them, she could not go over to the cottage as often as she wished, and unless she went over to the cottage as often as she wished, there would be a risk of Mopsie slipping out of her management altogether ; and if Mopsie slipped out of her management, it would not be so easy to establish herself as a visitor by-and-by in that pleasant house which was set apart as the residence of the head-master of the Saxelby Grammar School.

Poor Mopsie, who was afraid that her determination not to go to Mrs. Darrell would have produced a regular quarrel between herself and Tantie, was delighted to find things so smooth again. It was as if a great black cloud had rolled away. She would be able to come and see Uncle George and the little dog and Pletchley and everybody just as usual, and the only

difference would be that she should have two homes instead of one, which, of course, was very nice. And when she came to have tea with Tantie, or spend an evening with her, John, as she must call him now—but how very presumptuous it sounded—would come to fetch her, and they should have such delightful walks through the Abbey Close in the moonlight. Mopsie took for granted it would be moonlight whenever they walked through the Close, just as she took for granted it would be sunlight as they walked through all the long, long years of the life that they would have to live together.

She was looking out some blue ribbons to make bows for her hair, when she remembered Tantie's little hint about not having had sufficient attention paid to her the day before; so, stuffing all the things back into her drawer, she returned to the

dining-room, where Mrs. Maleveron was sitting, engaged in the somewhat difficult occupation of thinking everything into shape.

"So glad to have you back again, darling, though I suppose I must begin to treat you now like quite a grown-up young lady. And really I have never offered you my congratulations—so forgetful of me! Only, you know, I have had so many things to attend to. Come and let me kiss you now, and give you my very best wishes."

Mopsie came, and was kissed accordingly. If Mrs. Maleveron could have managed it, she would much rather have sent her away to Chalford, and married Mr. Ducross herself; but since she could not manage it, why, the next best thing was to be as smooth and pleasant and agreeable as possible.

"I shall miss you *so* much, Mopsie dear.

And in apartments, you know, one is so lonely."

"What about apartments, Tantie?"

"Lodgings, my dear. Of course I shall remove to lodgings, and I had thought of your being with me as *such* a comfort."

"But, Tantie, why are you going to lodgings, and why shall I make any difference?"

"My dear, there are going to be changes. I should have mentioned them to you before, as your uncle said it was proper you should know. In little more than a month he is to be married to Miss Granger, the lady you may perhaps remember when we lived at Oxford. It was perhaps very foolish of me to think that I could always be enough for him. Still I am sure I *had* that thought." And Mrs. Maleveron brought out her pocket-handkerchief.

"Uncle George going to be married ! Oh, how *very* nice for him !" said Mopsie, innocently, but, it must be confessed, without sufficient reflection.

"Yes, Mopsie, very nice for *him*," replied Mrs. Maleveron, with a grieved expression. "I have no doubt for *him* it will be everything that could be desired. Indeed——"

"Then do you mean it won't be so nice for Miss Granger ? Oh, but I think it *will*, Tantie. You know Uncle George is *so* good and *so* kind, and he always thinks about everybody. I am sure he will make her just as happy as ever she can be."

"Perhaps he will, Mopsie. Indeed, I hope and trust that it will be the case. But there are other people in the world besides your uncle and Miss Granger."

And Mrs. Maleveron wiped away another tear. How was it that people never seemed to consider, first of all, how she herself,

exquisitely organised, highly strung, sensitive to the least passing influence, might be affected by what happened to others?

"Of course," said Mopsie, gravely. And then it suddenly dawned upon her that by the "other people," Tantie meant herself. "Oh, you mean it will make a difference to you. I had never thought it would make a difference to you. I should have thought it would have been so nice, because, you know, you don't care for housekeeping, and making cakes, and that sort of thing; and if Uncle George marries Miss Granger, she will look after everything. You won't have anything to do, Tantie, but look nice."

Tantie smiled through her tears. It was pretty of Mopsie to say that. And Mopsie always said what she thought. Well, there was no telling. But she said, with the air of a woman who has tried the world and found it wanting,

"Ah! Mopsie dear, if you had gone through *my* experience, you would not talk about mere outward appearances. Everybody tells me how ridiculously young I look. I am sure it is not because I try to dress in that way. I have no wish to deceive."

"Oh! *Tantie*, you don't deceive! I am sure you wouldn't do such a wicked thing! Uncle George said you *quite* looked your age. Of course you wouldn't try to make it different."

"Uncle George has nothing to do with it," said Mrs. Maleveron, hastily. "Men are always so stupid. Why, he guessed Miss Granger at five-and-thirty, and she is ten years older, if a day, and looks it, too. I have heard people say she must be nearly fifty."

"Oh, *Tantie!*" said Mopsie, to whom fifty seemed an almost antediluvian age.

"Is it really? But, after all, what consequence is it, if she is nice? And what difference will it make to you, Tantie, when Uncle George is married?"

"Simply this," said Mrs. Maleveron, with the calm of conscious self-sacrifice: "that I shall have to give up my position as head of your uncle's house, and retire into the insignificance and discomfort of lodgings. But I don't complain. Why should I be cared for and taken any notice of? My day is over. It is right that I should be set on one side. When you and Uncle George are comfortably settled, I suppose I may sink into insignificance."

"Oh, no, *no!*" said impulsive little Mopsie, upon whom this pathetic appeal was working as Mrs. Maleveron intended it should work. "I think you ought to be just as important as ever. Why is there to be any difference?"

"Because, my dear, I shall have no position then. You are young and inexperienced, and you cannot understand it, but the difference is there all the same. Your uncle said he should be delighted for me to live with him, but of course I could not think of such a thing under the circumstances. I said if he would be kind enough to have me now and then, as a visitor, for a month or two——"

And Mrs. Maleveron paused. But Mopsie was not yet alive to the situation.

"I said if he would have me for a visitor now and then, it would be such a treat to me, because, you know, for anyone of very high-strung disposition, it is such a trial being in apartments. And then, perhaps, my friends in Oxford would take me now and then; and poor, dear Mrs. Darrell, though, Mopsie, I am afraid she will be dreadfully vexed with me about you. She

had reckoned upon it *so* much, you know. And then—well, then, I suppose, for the rest of the time I must just do the best I can. It is rather hard, after being accustomed for so long to everything that a brother's kindness can give."

"Oh, but of *course*," said Mopsie, who was now waking up to the truth that Tantie did not like to be in lodgings by herself. "Shall you never come to see me when—" And Mopsie coloured so prettily again. "When Mr. Ducross and I are married? I don't see why you should not come and stay with us too, unless—I wonder if the Grammar School boys do make a *very* great deal of noise."

"Oh! my *dear* child," said Mrs. Maleveron, who had now brought the conversation up to the desired point, "that is very kind of you, but how do you know that Mr. Ducross would like to be troubled with

an old woman like me? Though it would be *such* a delicious change now and then, I must confess. Still, you know, I could not think——”

“Oh! yes, Tantie, you *must* think.”

But then the postman came, bringing an Indian letter for Mopsie.

It was from the guardians, enclosing a list of the different things belonging to her father which were still in their possession, and intimating that they would shortly be packed and sent home to her. They also enclosed a list of the things which had previously been handed over to Mrs. Maleveron, plate, linen, china, &c.

“Of course, Mopsie dear, we must have them looked over now, to see that they are all right, as you will have to take them into your own possession, I suppose. I will send Pletchley for them at once.”

Pletchley brought down the chest, and

the "things" were turned over. Not that Mrs. Maleveron had been foolish enough to let such a quantity of eligible plate and linen lie useless there for the last seventeen years; instead, they had been doing pretty constant service all the time, though Mopsie never knew, until now, that they were her own.

"You know, dear, it is so much better not to keep things of this kind lying by: Table-linen, especially, loses its colour, until, after a few years, it is almost impossible to do anything with it. So I thought it was better to have it out, even though some of it, you see, has got a little worn. The china, of course, is just as good as ever; but, dear me! how I *shall* feel parting with it, Mopsie. I have had it in my sight so long that it has become almost like a part of myself."

Mrs. Maleveron had had it valued since she came to Saxelby, and found that it was

worth a great deal of money, and china steadily rising, too, at least that very delicate egg-shell sort. So no wonder it had become almost a part of herself, as silver with an alien monogram, and linen with somebody else's name marked upon it, could never become.

"Then why should I take it away?" said Mopsie, who was rather slow in realizing all the rights of possession which had come to her with her engagement, and entrance upon the solemnities of housekeeping. "I am sure it would be a great deal wiser for you to keep it, and then you can look at it whenever you like, and you will have something to remember me by. I don't suppose the people in India will care anything about it. They will not be vexed with me for giving it away."

"Oh! *dear*, no, Mopsie dear, and so sweet of you! I shall prize it so very, very much.

Do you know, it has been quite a *trouble* to me to even think of parting with it, as I was sure I must do some time or other, though really it does not seem right of me to take it from you."

"Oh !" said Mopsie, with more truth than she imagined, "I don't seem ever to have had it, and so it is not like taking it away from me. I am sure, Tantie, it does not make a bit of difference to me for you to have it. And if there is anything amongst the other things that you would like, I do wish you would just think about it, and tell me so."

Mrs. Maleveron kindly promised she would, and then asked if there was any further reference to business matters in the Indian letter.

"No; except to say that they are putting everything straight as fast as they can, and that they expect I shall have an income of

about five and twenty pounds a year when all is settled. They don't seem to think there is any chance of the thing ever coming right again."

"Dear me! A very great nuisance. But it will be of no consequence now, with such a handsome income as Mr. Ducross can place at your disposal. You are really a very fortunate little girl, Mopsie, and I am sure I congratulate you with all my heart. As for myself, well, I have had my day. I suppose I must be content." And Mrs. Maleveron looked aggrieved again. "But you won't forget me, Mopsie dear. I am sure you won't forget me. And now and then, when I happen to want a little change, you know, I shall run over and ask you to take me in for a week or two. We have been too long together, have we not, darling, to forget each other all at once?"

This brought the conversation back to

where it was when the Indian letter arrived, and before Mrs. Maleveron allowed it to go astray again, they had arranged that she was to look upon the head-master's house as her home, whenever she found that she needed change or rest or quiet.

In the afternoon Mopsie went back to the cottage, taking an affectionate farewell of Tantie, who congratulated herself on having managed everything so cleverly.

"My love to the dear Miss Maplethorpes," she said, "and tell them that I shall very often run across and have an hour with you. I shall feel parting with you so much, but I know it will be a great deal better for you to be with them, for they will teach you so many things that I really don't know anything about. I am such a stupid at housekeeping, and mending, and preserving, and looking after accounts, and all that sort of thing, and it would be

such a thousand pities for you not to take such a capital opportunity of learning. Now good-bye, darling, and mind you come again very, very soon."

Ten minutes more, and Mopsie was settled by Miss Maplethorpe's side in the cosy little cottage parlour, telling her how nicely everything was arranged, and that Tantie was so kind and good, and not a bit vexed now about Mrs. Darrell, or anything else, and that she had promised to come over and see her at the cottage very often, because she could not bear to be parted from her all at once; and she sent her love to the Miss Maplethorpes, and said she could never thank them enough for their kindness.

All which Callis Maplethorpe answered with a quiet smile, and then they began to talk about something else.

Mrs. Maleveron was a wise woman in her day and generation. If, with that exquisite

tact and management which had never failed her so signally before, she could have parted Mopsie and her lover, and appropriated the lover herself, she would have done so with the greatest alacrity, and considered the transaction as a fine illustration of the way in which Providence helps those who help themselves. Not having succeeded, however, she made the best of her failure, and resolved to consult her own interests by availing herself as much as possible of the happiness of her friends, since she could not reap a harvest out of their disappointment. It would go hard, she thought, if between her brother's married home, and Mopsie's, and those dear friends at Oxford and Chalford who were never tired of pressing her to go and see them, she could not make a tolerably pleasant thing of life, after all.

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM that time things went on beautifully. What pleasant days there were in the Manor Farm cottage, all through that summer and early autumn ! Days in which Mopsie got up with the lark and worked like a little Penelope at the sprigged net, not unpicking it at night, because the money earned by it was to provide the “ frocks and things,” as John Ducross called them, without which his lady-love could not enter upon the holy estate of matrimony. And Mopsie, with all her child-likeness and ignorance of the world, was as proud as a princess, and

would not for a single one of those pretty muslins and cambrics which became her so well, take a penny which she had not earned with her own fingers. Indeed, the wedding might have been most seriously delayed, had not one of the July Indian mails brought the half of that five-and-twenty pounds to which her annual income had dwindled, and so she was able, after paying Miss Maplethorpe something for her board and lodging, to buy a silk dress rich enough for the head-master's wife to go out to dinner in.

But the net sprigging only went on before breakfast and in the afternoons. During the mornings Miss Phebe initiated her into the mysteries of housekeeping, showed her how a weekly wash ought to be conducted, copied recipes for her, told her all about spring cleanings, how one ought to begin in the attics, and gradually drive the accumu-

lated impurities down, story by story, until they were finally ejected from the back door; also in what order the lustration of each separate room should proceed, first the walls, then the paint, then the fireplace, then the floor, lastly the windows, Mopsie writing everything down duly and truly in a small pocket-book which she had bought for the purpose, and alternating the domestic paragraphs with pretty little bits of poetry which she chanced upon in Miss Mapletorpe's favourite authors. Then there was the cookery department.

But Joan Latimer said nobody could teach that so well as herself, so she trotted down from the Mannersby almshouses once or twice a week on purpose, and showed Mopsie how to make raised crust and puff-paste and fairy butter, and no end of varieties of little sweet biscuits, chatting to her meanwhile about her father.

"The best friend ever I had, Miss Mopsie, in those days, and as true a gentleman as you'd find in a summer day's journey. If it hadn't been for him, my poor father might have ended his days in Saxelby gaol with Pomfret's villainy, as it gave me that sickening again' the men, I wouldn't listen to one of them no more, no, not was it ever so, and there was plenty of them ready to come about me when I began to take such good wage with your poor mother, Miss Maplethorpe."

For, somehow or other, Miss Maplethorpe always managed to find leisure to come and sit down in the kitchen when old Joan Latimer began to talk about her early troubles, and the way Martin Iselworth had helped her out of them. Joan said an extra person was always useful to mind the oven.

"You see, it's the oven as much as it's

anything else," she would impress upon Mopsie, who stood there, sleeved and bibbed and aproned, at the end of the cooking table, note-book in hand, to set down the exact quantities of everything. "Now a deal of people thinks, so long as you get it from under your hands, there's an end of it, and I knew a lady, and her a well brought-up one too, as, when she'd got her week's baking inside the oven door, went and cleaned herself, and sat down to her fine work in the parlour, without so much as a thought of what was to come, and it doesn't need me to tell you, Miss Mopsie, they weren't a deal to be proud of when they come out, for as brown as they were on one side, and risen up crooked, and neither make nor shape about them. No, if you don't want your labour wasted, stick to it while the end ; for my experience, and I've had a deal, is this—your best of

millers may grind your flour, and your best of cooks may work it, but unless a careful-ler than both of 'em minds the oven, your labour's lost when you've done it."

Miss Phebe, in an arm-chair by the old clock, was shelling peas for dinner.

"Yes," she said to herself, in a low, meditative voice, "Paul may plant, and Apollos may water, but it is——"

"Ah, Miss Phebe," interrupted Joan, "how you do give a profitable turn to everything! You was always one for knowing the Scriptures from a child, and had a text to fit, let one say what one might. You've a wonderful gift in prayer, but next to that it's Bible-learning that you have it in, same as I should be thankful if Faith yonder had it too; but, deary me! the trouble I have to get a Psalm into her, so as she can say it off. And she's quick enough about a deal of things."

Faith proved that for herself, for just then Reuben's stalwart form hove in sight, bowed beneath Mr. Atcherley's monthly sack of flour, and with a patience which, applied in a different direction, might have stored her memory with no end of Psalms, she stood there by the tub, making with her two plump uncovered arms a safe and convenient trough for the descent of the flour, that not so much as a grain of it might be lost. Of course this took rather a long time, for Reuben, stooping low down, and gradually tilting the sack, could not well see how the contents were going, and Faith enjoyed standing there too much to hurry him; and doubtless he, touching sometimes, as if by accident, those plump round arms, and giving their owner a playful little nudge during the tilting of the sack, appreciated the position as well as she did.

But ten stones of the best seconds, however leisurely poured out, must come to an end; and Reuben, after much shaking and tapping of the empty sack, at last convinced himself that nothing had been wasted, and pulling his front lock to the ladies went away, followed by Faith, who had to fasten the back-gate after him.

"It'll soon be midsummer, Faith," he said, giving the sack, ere he replaced it in Luke Atcherley's waggon, a shake which sent up a white cloud into the rose-scented pure sunshine.

"That's a true word, Reuben," answered Faith. "I know it well, for it's the day Miss Maplethorpe gives me my quarter's wage."

"And I lay there's something you've got to give *her* this quarter, Faith."

"What's that?" said Faith, carelessly.

"Warning. You promised me last

back end, when Mr. Atcherley raised me eighteenpence a week, that you would give warning after midsummer quarter, and get fettled up ready for the wedding."

"Wedding, Reuben?" and Faith tossed her red little chin. "There's like to be plenty of weddings this midsummer, without our troubling. Mr. Ducross don't come here regular night after night and sit there with Miss Isral in the summer-house for nothing, and her that tossy with everybody else they might be the dust under her feet—I mean if it's Mr. Burrowby Atcherley, or ought of that sort. And the yards and yards of print and stuff that I've seen come into this house."

"They say one wedding makes more," said Reuben, shrewdly, drawing Faith into the shelter of the lilac-trees behind the pump to give her a lover's salute. In

return, Faith, ungrateful that she was, gave him a box on the ear.

“There, take that for your pains. And Miss Phebe as likely as not to come out. There’s never no knowing on a baking morning when the pump may be wanted, and what do you think she’d think?”

“Why, that I was badly off,” said Reuben, rubbing his ear. “I lay Miss Iselworth doesn’t do that way with Mr. Ducross.”

“There’s plenty of time to change, then; and if the men says true, they can pick where they like. Aunt Latimer’s here to-day.”

“Well,” said Reuben, not seeing the connection.

“Well,” said Faith, with another toss of her chin, “if you were not an addlehead, you might guess I’d have to set her home, and her that lame after she’s done a day’s

work that she can scarce set one foot before another, not to say get over that stile betwixt here and the meadows, as might beat a dancing tumbler. I reckon we shall have to go round the long road, when all's said and done."

"Then I'll go too," said Reuben, awakening to the situation, "and then when you've set your aunt home, I can set you back. It's well you've told me, because I'll smarten myself up a bit, elseways I might have happened of you just as I am, because the foreman was at me yesterday about taking one of the waggons down to the wheelwright's shop, and I could ha' put it in after work to-night; but I lay I'll none tew with the waggons when I can get a walk with you, and after hours too."

"Just as you like," said Faith, moving towards the back-gate, as a hint that Reuben had been long enough, for just then

Miss Phebe's white sun-bonnet appeared at the kitchen door. "I reckon aunt and me will be starting a bit after seven, but there's no need to trouble yourself."

Reuben did trouble himself, though, and came across Faith and old Joan Latimer just as they were turning into the wheelwright's lane; and after a cosy chat in the almshouses, he set Faith home, and got her to promise that at midsummer day she would give Miss Maplethorpe warning, and go to stay with her aunt until the wedding.

"Save and to say if Miss Iselworth gets off afore, Reuben. I'll none leave the missis while the throng's over, and she not the woman she used to be for strength. And so you needn't think it."

And try as he would, Reuben could not get her to say anything else.

Then at night, when all the Grammar School work was over, John Ducross used

to come across to the cottage, and they were so happy together in the little front parlour, Miss Maplethorpe and Phebe, who remembered their own youthful days, slipping quietly away now and then, to have a stroll together in the garden. And not unfrequently of an afternoon Tantie would come over, all smiles, and good-humour, and pleasantness, to have a cup of tea with them, and inquire how the wedding preparations were going on. And sometimes she would ask if she could not help Mopsie with a little of her plain sewing, but somehow or other she always asked the question when it was impossible to answer it straightforwardly there and then; and when a convenient season came, she forgot to mention the subject again, so that Mopsie was not much better for any help she got in that direction.

She did not, however, forget to say that she had set her heart upon a little silver

cream-jug, one of Mopsie's Indian possessions, and as Mopsie had been so kind as to say that if there was anything amongst the plate that she very, very particularly liked, she might venture to mention it, it would be so nice not to have to part with that jug, because it went so prettily with the tea-cups which dear Mopsie had told her she might keep. Would Mopsie very much mind letting her have it?

For whatever else Mrs. Maleveron lost, she would never lose the power of looking after herself.

CHAPTER XVII.

FAITH was quite right. That year was one of much marrying and giving in marriage amongst the good people of Saxelby. Indeed, the clerk, and sexton, and pew-openers, and other minor officials of the Abbey Church, had not pocketed such store of half-crowns and sovereigns for many a long day.

First in the series came the weddings of Selina and Millicent Atcherley, both celebrated on the same morning. Mrs. Atcherley could not resist going in to tell Mrs. Dibthorpe all about it, a day or two before the

actual ceremony. Both that lady and her daughter, Mrs. Bainsley, had accepted invitations to the breakfast, but of course that could only be a season of triumph, not of conversation ; and the mother of the two brides naturally liked to be able to enter into particulars, especially when Mrs. Dibthorpe had been so set up about getting her daughter married into the best society of Broadminster.

“It will be such a sight, you may depend, as was never seen before in Saxelby Abbey Church,” said Mrs. Atcherley, throwing open her velvet mantle with a view to more unimpeded respiration. “Luke’s done it all with never a thought of what anything would cost, and everything new down from London ; travelling silks, too, for he said there was nothing like a first-rate Regent Street shop, when you *were* doing.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Dibthorpe, with

that air of taking everything for granted which irritated good Mrs. Atcherley so whenever she was bent upon taking the wind out of the other lady's sails. "For my own part, I never think of putting on a thing that has not been turned out by a London hand. But, do you know? I should have thought on an occasion like this you would have sent to Paris direct. There is nothing like French style for a wedding."

And Mrs. Dibthorpe bent down to count the stitches in a design she was copying for a mantel-piece border. If the *trousseaux* were not French, why, they were simply nothing at all, and in that case Mrs. Atcherley need not have taken the trouble to come and tell her about them. Anyone could send up an order to a London shop, if *that* was all.

The look of blank regret which slowly

absorbed Mrs. Atcherley's previous complacency was just what her friend expected. Why *hadn't* Luke thought of Paris? Mrs. Dibthorpe had taken the gilt off the gingerbread completely, so far as the costumes were concerned. And to do it in that quiet, unconscious way. It was too aggravating. And as she went on she made matters worse.

"Still I have no doubt everything will look very pretty. Millicent, of course, is rather old for white satin, so you must not expect people to compliment her on her appearance, because, you know, nothing is so trying as dead white when the first bloom of youth is past. I suppose pearl or cream did not suggest itself to her as being more becoming. What a pity she did not consult Bella! I am sure Bella would have told her cream, and it would have made her look quite a different person. But I dare-

say her veil is well sprigged, so as to cover the complexion."

"Oh! yes," said Mrs. Atcherley, feeling that here at any rate she was on safe ground. If Honiton sprays, sewn on as thick as money could sew them, were of any avail, she might answer Mrs. Dibthorpe with a good courage. "Their pa said they were both of them to have the best that could be made down in Devonshire, and they've been getting ready this six weeks past. I said why not have them just sprigged here and there, like your Bella's, you remember, for where's the use of wasting money? But Luke won't have anything mean; he says it's a thing that's done once, and he'll have it done well."

"Yes," said Mrs. Dibthorpe, heedless of the imputation upon the state of her husband's exchequer at the time of Bella's marriage, "and I am sure Mr. Atcherley

was very wise. At her time of life it would never do to expose Millicent's face through a veil that was not well covered, and the chalk-white satin, too, to make matters worse. Now when Bella was married she had a skin like milk and roses. It would have been positively ridiculous to have covered it up with anything but plain net. Everyone said she was a lovely bride, but then people will look at Millicent's dress, instead of her face, so it will not be of so much consequence. And is it true that you are to wear plum-coloured velvet, with real point lace?"

Mrs. Dibthorpe knew it was not. She only asked to make the myrtle green satin, which she knew was to be worn, and which had cost twenty-five shillings a yard, and which she expected would be flouted in her teeth next, appear rather a poor substitute. She succeeded. Mrs. Atcherley was just

going to introduce the myrtle satin ; but now, after the mere mention of plum-coloured velvet, with real point, why, it had an air almost of poverty about it. But let this wedding once get over, and Mrs. Dibthorpe should never have the chance of running her down so shamefully again.

“No, Mrs. Dibthorpe. I’m thankful to say I’m not going to be in velvet at all, because it’s not what I should wish to see myself wear, and the starving mouths that there are in Saxelby at the present time. Though I’ve no doubt if my husband made his giving as small as *some* people do, he might put me into velvet and diamonds, and never feel the difference. But he’s not that sort of man.”

Mrs. Atcherley felt she had done it cleverly, for once. Though she had not said a word to that effect, Mrs. Dibthorpe would know as well as could be that she referred

to Mr. Dibthorpe's givings at the collections, and to the extremely mean manner in which he came forward when that testimonial was presented to Mr. Borrowmont. A paltry two guineas, and his wife making the pretensions she did ! And then for *her* to talk about plum-coloured velvet.

“Dear !” said Mrs. Dibthorpe, as amiably as could be, ignoring everything that she could not stand well up against. “I could have been as sure as possible that some one told me it was to be plum velvet, and I was so surprised, because I said it would make you look so much stouter than you really are, and you know there is no need for that ; though at the same time it would have been just the thing for you in many other ways, and I always say velvet is so safe when a lady has not a good eye for colour. How could Millicent tell me, I wonder, that it was to be velvet ?”

"I don't know, Mrs. Dibthorpe, but I'm sure I'm quite content with the green satin my husband got me down from Swan and Edgar's, because they hadn't a shade that pleased him at any other shop in London. I'm sure if I'd been a princess there couldn't have been more backwardsing and forwardsing about that satin, to get the very thing that Luke wanted."

"Yes, I daresay." And Mrs. Dibthorpe worked in a bit of Greek bordering, with supreme indifference. "You see green is a colour that is so little worn now, at least that myrtle green, though of course the delicate shades are always fashionable, that I almost wonder you could get it at all. It must have been *quite* an old shopkeeper. Bella tells me you never see such a thing, even in Broadminster, though, if you have a fancy for it, it is always better to buy a thing you have a fancy for."

"It's very little to me what I wear," said poor Mrs. Atcherley, baffled at every turn, and trying to appear now as if the whole affair were of as small importance to herself as it evidently was to Mrs. Dibthorpe. It was too bad, and when she had come intending to have such a triumph. "Luke always says green, because it brings forward my complexion so, and he's as proud of it to the present day as if we'd only been married yesterday; or else, so long as I've a good quality, I don't mind the colour. I must say I like a good quality, and I always wear it, too. I shouldn't feel like myself in a silk that was under half a guinea a yard."

"I daresay you wouldn't," said Mrs. Dibthorpe. "Some people take a deal of dressing. It is a great convenience to me that I can carry anything. And now tell me about Selina. What are they going to live upon? Do you think he will ever get

beyond a curacy? Very handsome, but not with powers above the average, you know. Still I always say that is of no consequence in a clergyman. So long as he looks nice in the pulpit, that is all anyone expects."

"Oh!" replied Mrs. Atcherley, not quite understanding the full meaning of Mrs. Dibthorpe's remarks, "her pa will see that they are not pinched, as far as a living goes. He's promised them three hundred a year, and he's furnishing them their drawing-room with the best amber damask. I should say Mr. Anson will be as well off, with what he earns for himself, maybe, as Mr. Bainsley, and then her pa's allowance to make it up. Millicent's to get four hundred, and then Thomas Burrowby draws three too. I say it isn't every man in Saxelby could part with his thousand a year in that way, and never feel the difference."

“Three hundred to Mr. Burrowby! Dear me! and I thought an Indian appointment was such a good thing. It must be very unsatisfactory to have to bolster up a young man in that way. But I daresay he will marry a rich wife before long. Lucky escape, was it not, for him, about Miss Iselworth? Everybody saw how things would have gone, if it had not been for the loss of the property. And though people *did* talk, I always said, Mrs. Atcherley, that your son was very prudent. Why should a man hamper himself for life with a girl who has scarcely a penny to bless herself with, and when there are plenty waiting with nice little fortunes to be had for the asking?”

Really this was getting worse and worse. To say that Thomas Burrowby was mercenary was *almost* as bad as taking the shine out of the wedding garments by suggesting that they ought to have been ordered from

Paris, when the plain truth was that they had only come out of one of the best shops in Regent Street. And though Thomas Burrowby was not her own child, still even a stepmother might be supposed to have her feelings when told that her husband's son had thrown a girl over because she had lost her property.

"Well, Mrs. Dibthorpe." And Mrs. Atcherley was obliged here, though she had not intended it, to unfasten a button or two. Miss Lecruse would draw her in so tight, even in her every-day dresses. "Well, Mrs. Dibthorpe, people may talk, or people may hold their tongues, for what I trouble myself about them; but I will say this, that Thomas Burrowby Atcherley—" and Mrs. Atcherley gave the three names with dignity—"Thomas Burrowby Atcherley is not a man that needs to think whether his wife is going to have a fortune or not; and

I am quite sure that, if he thought about Miss Iselworth at all, he thought about herself, and not what money she might have, or might not have. And as you say, everybody could see how it was going to be, until Mr. Ducross came in, and getting the start as he did with going into the cottage day in and day out, to sketch the oak panelling in the best parlour, I do think people might find something better to say than that my son had a thought about the property."

"Mr. Ducross!" said Mrs. Dibthorpe, thrown off her guard for once, and really expressing the surprise which she actually felt. "Why, you don't mean to say that Mr. Ducross is thinking about Miss Iselworth!"

For Bella Bainsley, when she was Bella Dibthorpe, had had her own little schemes in connection with the head-master of Saxelby Grammar School, and they had only

failed because Mr. Ducross was such a persistent avoider of feminine charms. And if the truth must be told, Mrs. Dibthorpe would much rather have seen her daughter settled at Broadminster, with eight hundred a year, than scratching along under a thin film of gentility as the wife of a Broadminster proctor, on an income of three hundred and fifty.

“Why, do *you* say you haven’t heard of it?” echoed Mrs. Atcherley, putting off at once her vexation and her dignity, and entering joyfully upon this new track, in which at least she had the advantage of the latest information, and in which, at any rate, Mrs. Dibthorpe could not snub her about satins at five-and-twenty shillings a yard. “Do you mean to say you have never heard of it? But then, I daresay it isn’t a deal talked about yet, and her the child that she is, and the wedding-day not

fixed. Yes, she's going to be married to Mr. Ducross of the Grammar School, and much luck may she have of him, I say; for the little *we* saw of him, I wouldn't have him in my family with double his income. Scarcely a word to say for himself, and none of your nice little attentions that Mr. Anson is always so ready with. For myself, I've no opinion of science, if it's to make a man as dull as a baking of bread with the yeast left out."

Mrs. Dibthorpe laughed, really quite a pleasant laugh. And so Mr. Ducross was going to be married. Now that it was a subject upon which there was no rivalry between them, she could afford to be almost an amiable woman, though still she believed that the property *had* made a difference to young Mr. Burrowby after all.

"Well, really, wonders will never cease. And such a position for her, too, though the

very last person in the world I should have thought suited for it. Such an entire want of manners, you know, and looks just as if she had tumbled downstairs by accident out of the nursery. Now if he had chosen your Millicent, I should have said, Mrs. Atcherley, that he had shown a great deal more sense. But I suppose we must let people do as they like. And she lives with the Miss Maplethorpes now, I understand—very curious !”

“Well, no, Mrs. Dibthorpe, I don’t call it very curious, and the vicar’s sister a woman who knows well enough where to look for the butter on her bread. I believe, if everybody spoke the truth, Mrs. Dibthorpe, that hundred and fifty pounds a year has made a deal more difference to Mrs. Maleveron than ever it would have made to Thomas Burrowby. They say she’s gone to learn housekeeping, but I be-

lieve—and I'm a woman who doesn't speak without thinking—that she's gone for just nothing at all but because Mrs. Maleveron didn't want to keep her any longer."

"They do say at Broadminster," Mrs. Dibthorpe observed, "that she had her eye upon Mr. Ducross herself, some years ago, but he did not see it. You know Bella goes about amongst the clergymen there, and some of them knew him at Oxford. I did hear a whisper that she threw him over for a German gentleman. And then the German gentleman threw *her* over."

"Dear me! what a world it is!" said Mrs. Atcherley, innocently. "I wonder what men and women can be made of now-a-days. When I married Luke, I knew my own mind before I said yes, and then went on to the end without so much as thinking of a change. But times are not what they were."

And with that Mrs. Atcherley buttoned up her mantle and departed, feeling that Mrs. Dibthorpe was not so bad after all, though the best of her friends could not say she was so good as she might have been. But on her way home she turned in to the cottage, just to have a little really comfortable conversation with Miss Maplethorpe. Somehow Miss Maplethorpe, whatever came up, always managed to smooth things down, and sent her home feeling a better and more contented woman ; whereas with Mrs. Dibthorpe one needed to have the temper of a saint, if ever a word happened to be said about the respective positions of their husbands. She did seem to have such malice at her tongue's end, and always turned things the wrong way, until one might have thought she was the biggest lady in the place, instead of being, as everybody knew, scarcely able to pay her way respectably, to

say nothing of lording it over other people. But there was good in her, after all. There was no denying that, when one got her on the right side.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON the day appointed the double wedding took place, with such ringing of bells, prancing of horses, scattering of flowers, distribution of favours, and drawing of champagne corks, as had never before been known in Saxelby. Even old Joan Latimer, who came all the way from Mannersby on purpose to see the sight, said it fairly beat anything she had seen in all her born days.

"It beats Mrs. Borrowmont's all to nothing," she remarked to Faith, who had a couple of hours' holiday for the occasion, "for as far as the satins and the laces goes,

but there's a summut wanting as one never gets when it isn't a quality wedding. It passes me to say what it is, but *there* it is, and anybody as has an eye and a half can see it, if it's only the way the gentlemen stands and holds their hats and things. Now when it's quality, they don't ever seem to be thinking about themselves. There they are, and they go through with it, same as if they were doing nothing but eating their dinner ; but if it's the other sort you've got to do with, why, they might be just a set of mawkins set there for you to stare at, like any other show as you'd paid your sixpence to see. It beats me where it is, but I know it's somewhere."

Mrs. Dibthorpe wore the flimsiest of silks, —even the elder bride herself, walking up to the altar by her father's side, took notice of that—with a lot of muslin frilling trailed over it, to hide its poverty. Bella was in

nothing but Japanese, and that not of the best quality, though stylishly made, as the same acute observer noted in passing.

But the brides made up for it themselves, in the chalk-white satins as aforesaid, with Honiton veils sprayed and sprigged up to the very crowns of their heads, and not a stitch or a thread of difference between them, except that Selina's complexion showed to a little more advantage, she taking after her mother in that respect. Thomas Burrowby was head-groomsman to his sister, and as he toyed with the bouquet of the rich Miss Prendergast, who was chief bridesmaid, he doubtless thought what a good thing it was that John Ducross had supplanted him in his former preference; otherwise by the present time he might have been standing there as bridegroom himself, with a penniless Mopsie to his

fortune, and that was not at all the sort of thing he had laid out for himself.

Mrs. Atcherley did not go to the ceremony. Millicent had so much to say about how she was to behave, and what she was to say, and where she was to stand, and when she was to put her pocket-handkerchief to her eyes, and when she was to kiss the brides, and impressed upon her so severely the necessity of not raising her voice above a certain tone, and not seeming fussed or uneasy about anything, that finally she thought she had best keep away from it altogether, and let those go who had learned their lesson more perfectly. And perhaps it was as well after all, as she said to Miss Maplethorpe next day, for it gave her time to dress comfortably, and see that her cap was straight, and be ready in her place in the drawing-room "against they came back"

from church, instead of being so blown and breathless as she was quite sure she should have been if she had had to bustle about at the wedding, and shake hands, and hear the congratulations, and all that sort of thing.

One happy pair went to Switzerland, and the other to Rome, Mrs. von Strengel taking final leave of her parents, as her husband was not returning to England. In due time there came highly satisfactory accounts of her position in society, the numbers of titled people she met, and the great consideration in which she was held. And as they had had rather heavy expenses in settling down and refitting the old family mansion, could dear papa advance them a few hundred pounds to make everything straight? Of course another year they should be able to get on nicely enough, but taking possession of an estate which had not been lived upon

for some years necessitated a serious outlay.

Dear papa advanced the few hundreds willingly, being so much pleased by the account of the family estate and the titled people amongst whom his daughter mixed on such friendly terms. Somehow expenses were just as heavy next year, and the money could not be returned; but to a man of Mr. Atcherley's means that was of no consequence.

In due time the excellent Miss Granger became Mrs. Randolph. They spent their honeymoon in visiting the parish churches of Broadshire, and enjoyed it very much, as they saw a great deal of clerical society, and gained new insight into the different modes of parochial work—insight which was very valuable to the vicar's wife, who came to what she called her enlarged sphere of usefulness with a thoroughly earnest desire to do her duty in it.

Indeed, she was so very anxious to do her duty in it that Mrs. Maleveron, who of course had kept house at the vicarage during her brother's absence, thought it was a great pity she should not devote her entire time and talents to that object. And that she might more conveniently do so, Mrs. Maleveron, with that spirit of self-sacrifice which was so conspicuous in all she said and did, generously offered to take upon herself the burden of the housekeeping, and so leave her sister-in-law to be a true helpmeet to the vicar. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Randolph objected, and as of course Mrs. Maleveron found it much more laborious to arrange things after her brother's marriage necessitated an extra servant in the house, she gently hinted to him that the little yearly allowance which he had proposed making to her, had she left him, should become an honorarium for all the pains and

trouble she took in managing domestic affairs for them both now.

“Because you know, George dear, Marian is such an admirable worker in the parish, and it does seem such a pity to diminish her usefulness by burdening her with all those household worries which a common-place woman like myself can do just as well. Of course, you know, her health would not stand both, and if she had the trouble of entertaining society, and managing servants, and all that sort of thing, the parish would be deprived of so much valuable service. So I was saying to her only yesterday, and she saw it in just the same light as I did, that it would be an immense convenience if she had some one to take everything off her hands. Don’t you think so?”

George did, but thought at the same time that perhaps his sister might be over-

taxing her own powers, as she had not a very definite taste for domestic matters, and had even sent Mopsie to Miss Maplethorpe to be better trained in that department.

“Ah! yes, George dear, but then it was different. You know, when Mopsie was first engaged, I had such a *great* deal to think about, in getting the house into order for your marriage. You don’t know what heaps of things I had to order, and really, with my delicate health, it was quite enough for me to attend to *your* comfort, which of course was my first thought. And as Miss Maplethorpe seemed so anxious to have the child, I yielded, as it gave me the opportunity of devoting myself more entirely to you. Otherwise of course I could have taught dear Mopsie *everything* that was necessary. I should like to be of use to you still,” continued Mrs. Maleveron, with an affectionate look towards her brother, “and I

think I shall be helping you *so* much by taking everything off Marian's hands, and leaving her at liberty to join you in parish work. And as for remuneration, don't let us talk about that. You will do everything for me, I know, that a brother ought."

Mrs. Maleveron calculated that that graceful little flourish of generosity would be worth at least fifty pounds a year to her, and she was not mistaken. It was worth everything in the world to have a brother who believed in her ; and dear Marian too, absorbed in ideas of parish usefulness, fell in so delightfully with the little plan, seeing in it only a guiding of Providence towards a more complete giving up of herself to that work which had long been the joy of her life. So within a couple of months of the vicar's wedding, it was agreed that Isabel was to stay with them at a salary of fifty

pounds a year, and go away to visit her friends whenever she liked, the air of Saxelby being such as might probably oblige her to seek occasional change.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE next wedding was Mopsie's, but it was so exceedingly quiet and uninteresting, looked at from the fashionable point of view, that the mention of it, after those of Millicent and Selina Atcherley, almost needs an apology.

It did not take place until September had begun to tinge the cottage elms with gold, to say nothing of thinning their leaves, until Miss Maplethorpe herself remarked that the summer-house would soon be quite too exposed a situation for John Ducross and Mopsie to have their conversations there of

an afternoon. Mr. Ducross became very impatient as the engagement lengthened itself month by month, but as Mrs. Malveron had so kindly and conveniently withdrawn from any legal responsibilities with regard to Mopsie, and as those responsibilities, so long as the young lady was under age, must be recognised by somebody, a lengthy correspondence between the parties interested in Saxelby and Bombay was the result. At last, however, the final documents were signed, sealed, and delivered, the marriage licence was procured from Mr. Randolph, and within the space of a week Mopsie Iselworth was to become Mrs. John Ducross.

But, as before remarked, she was to enter through the gates of matrimony with so little flourish of trumpets that the affair was scarcely worth mentioning.

“You don’t mean to say it’s to be nothing

but book muslin, and a straw bonnet with white ribbons," said Mrs. Atcherley, a few weeks before the wedding, "and her going to marry the head-master of Low Saxelby Grammar School, with his eight hundred a year, if a penny. Well, I never did! And no bridesmaids, neither? But I'll warrant it's Mr. Ducross has made her have it that way, for they do say he's that peculiar, there's no telling what he'll do next. Dear me! I hope she'll be happy with him."

But Mrs. Atcherley evidently had her doubts, as a woman cannot but be expected to have when a middle-aged man compels a girl to book muslin and a straw bonnet against all the instincts of her sex. In vain Miss Maplethorpe assured her that Mopsie desired nothing more—that her soul would be abundantly satisfied with Manchester book at elevenpence-halfpenny a yard, and not over a silk slip either.

"It's all very well to say it," replied Mrs. Atcherley, "but there's more to follow when a man begins in that way. A man like Mr. Ducross, when he's going to marry a girl without a penny, will either be master or he'll be slave, and it lies pretty strong upon my mind that he means to be master, by the way he takes hold of the reins at starting. And her a girl that would have looked so pretty in a white tulle veil, with a few orange blossoms, and her hair nicely smoothed down. Don't tell me, Miss Maplethorpe, it's her own act and deed. I know what girls are, and it's nothing of the sort. Why, look at Selina. Do you think Mr. Anson could have put *her* into eleven-penny book, if he'd tried ever so? I'd like to have seen him, and her mind set upon white satin, as it was from the beginning—yes, and very properly too. I'm not a woman that thinks a deal of outside show,

but I do like a girl to have her feelings respected, Miss Maplethorpe. And a walking wedding, did you say?"

Miss Maplethorpe admitted there were to be no carriages.

"Well, I *never* did!" And Mrs. Atcherley began to reckon up on her fingers how many they had when Millicent and Selina were married.

"A deal more than the liverymen at this place could supply, and so Luke got them all the way from Broadminster, and sixteen of them, besides private ones. It was a pretty bill, I can tell you, but when my husband makes up his mind to a thing, he goes through with it. Fancy Millicent and Selina put off with a *walking* wedding! But Mr. Anson was a man that gave in from the first, and as for Mr. von Strengel, it was how to get enough to satisfy *him*, with belonging to such great folks out there. I

reckon Bella Bainsley, with all her Broadminster talk, can't hold up her head above my two girls now. And Thomas Burrowby, getting on as well as he is with Miss Prendergast, though whether they'll make a match of it now, or whether she'll go out to him, I don't see as yet. And is Miss Iselworth getting a many presents?"

If Miss Maplethorpe had any sails up, the wind must surely have been taken out of them. Not that good-hearted Mrs. Atcherley asked her questions with the high-bred spitefulness which Mrs. Dibthorpe once brought into such effective play. On the contrary, she only wanted to express her sympathy at what she considered a truly painful and unnatural state of things, a state of things which, if she could have altered it, should soon have been swept away and replaced by fifteen-and-sixpenny white satin at the very

least, with carriages to match. Fortunately, however, Miss Maplethorpe's canvas was reefed as tight as that of a ship in a north-wester. She was not even conscious of anything to be humiliated about, as she replied,

"I think not. I haven't seen one yet, except a timepiece from the vicar. I think Mopsie's good luck will have to come after her marriage, and not before."

"That's the best time for it to come, Miss Maplethorpe, not but what she might have a turn both ways, if that was all. Their pa gave Millicent and Selina a many, because of having them published in the paper, where they made a nice show, though it wasn't my doing to have them sent there. But Luke paid for that, same as he paid for everything else. He sent five guineas to the young man that does the local intelligence for the *Chronicle*, and told him he was to

make a column of it, and put in what they wore, and the presents and the Abbey decorations, and the carriages, so that it might make a good effect. But I must say this, Miss Maplethorpe, that it was a great relief to me when it was all over, and dressed up to the nines as everybody was, and that myrtle-green satin tightening me in so that how I ever sat through the breakfast is a wonder and a miracle, up to the present day. You won't have *that* to go through, Miss Maplethorpe, if it's to be quiet. I daresay you won't so much as get new silks."

Miss Maplethorpe said new silks were exactly what they were not going to get.

"Luke said he thought you wouldn't, and a deal of trouble you'll save yourselves. I never sit easy in a dress myself, while I've had it six months, and I'm sure at a wedding, let it be as small as you will, you've

enough on your mind, without feeling that you've got every breath to think about, as I'm sure you do when Miss Lecruse makes for you. And if there's anything *we* can do for you now, Miss Maplethorpe, you'll let me know, won't you? You're welcome to whatever's in the house, only mention it. And if the maids would be any use, for with Millicent and Selina gone, and Thomas Burrowby always off at the Prendergasts, I declare they've little else to do but to sit with their hands before them, and I'd send them over with the very greatest of pleasure; so don't be uneasy, but just speak up when the time comes."

And with that good Mrs. Atcherley bustled away.

But no strange hands waited on Mopsie's bridal festivities. Old Joan Latimer herself came up from the almshouses to make the wedding feast, and who can tell what love

she put into the cakes, and the fancy pastry, and the fairy butter, and how carefully she skimmed the jelly, which, when cold, was to be cut into shapes, and put round four moulds of blancmange for the corner dishes?

“She shall have none of your nasty shop things, bless her!” said Joan to Faith, as she peered down into the pan, to see if a speck of scum was left behind, before she poured it into the bag to strain. “All chemicals and poisons, not fit for a Christian to touch. It’s everything to do it yourself, when you’re doing it for one you love, and I said from the very first, when I knew how it was going to be, that I’d see everything on to the table with my own eyes, and do ’em with my own hands, if my back ached for a week after. I shall never need to do it for no one else now, unless, maybe, I make shift to beat up a cake for yourself, Faith, when your wedding comes.”

Faith, blanching almonds for the fairy butter, tossed her little chin, but looked pleased nevertheless.

“I tell Reuben he don’t need to fuss hisself. I’m not the sort as can’t wait a bit. He was at me a bit since to give missis warning, and get the banns put up, but I told him banns was a thing that would keep, and I’d like to see myself with more gowns and body-linen laid up before I did anything as I couldn’t undo. I reckon it’ll take while Christmas to get myself fettled with stockings and calico things, and I told him as much, and if he won’t wait, there’s a many that will. I’ve cleaned ’em all, aunt, now, it’s only to cut ’em and crush ’em, and then they’re ready.”

This referred to the almonds which Faith was blanching, not to the possible lovers who might be ready and willing to wait, if Reuben was not; and by noon the fairy butter was

finished, and set away in the larder, such a sight for perfection and yellowness as could not have been matched amongst all the fine dishes of the Atcherley bridal breakfast.

That morning, the morning before the wedding, as Mopsie and John Ducross were sitting under the elm-trees, the railway rulle, with two great square boxes "wabbling" on the top of it, drew up at the garden-gate.

"He has made a mistake," said Mopsie. "Miss Maplethorpe never gets any boxes, and I'm sure I don't."

"It's not a mistake," said John. "There is the man bringing the book for you to sign. They are your things from India, Mopsie."

And so they were, in two chests big enough for half a dozen Mopsies to have been safely packed up and tinned down inside them.

Like a sensible man, knowing that Faith was busy in the kitchen, John helped to bring the chests into the porch, and then he went across to the wheelwright's for a hammer and chisel and screw-driver, and opened them, and cut the tin lining. And then, like a still more sensible man, thinking that Mopsie might as well be left alone with her treasures, he went away, only sending Miss Maplethorpe to help her to unpack them.

Mopsie would rather have stayed with John Ducross under the elm-trees than turned out any quantity of Indian things belonging to a past which for her had so little reality. For Miss Maplethorpe it was different. There were Martin Iselworth's books—books which she remembered his lending to her father years and years ago, and they brought back so strangely winter evenings in the old house in the High Street,

the places where they sat, the things they were talking about, when at different times Martin had brought those books out of his pocket, and pointed out passages, and asked her father's opinion, and sometimes hers, about them. And there were little things belonging to him—his watch and chain, some ornaments that used to stand on the mantel-piece of his lodging in the High Street, some old-fashioned linen doilies which Mrs. Maplethorpe had given him—Callis remembered them so well—for a Christmas gift the winter before he went away. Callis always had a great reputation for doing that fine sort of handiwork, and when her mother had finished the marking-ink etchings of leaves and flowers in the centre of each doily, they were handed over to her to fringe, and draw out the threads in a pattern, and then mark Mr. Iselworth's name in the corner.

He had taken care of them all. And there were quaint Indian curiosities, boxes of sandal-wood, fans of peacocks' feathers and beetles' wings, filigree bracelets and necklets of Cuttack work, little bits of rare and beautiful Kincob embroidery, pieces of India muslin, and some jewelry belonging to Mopsie's mother, packed and labelled in a box by itself. Somehow Miss Maplethorpe could not even look at the contents of that box. She told Mopsie she had better put it away carefully, and open it when she had more time.

"Shall I open everything else when I have more time?" said Mopsie, whose thoughts were with the future, not the past, just now. What blame to her if John Ducross, whose warm, close hand-clasp had scarcely left her own, was more to her than the father and mother whose kisses she had never known, whose faces, looks, ways, and words imagination had to picture for her,

since her memory had been able to keep no trace of them?

"No," said Callis. "Let us go on now. It will not take you long."

Last of all they came to Martin Iselworth's writing-desk, brass-bound and belted, with his initials engraved on a shield at the top. Mopsie was going to open that.

With a curious sort of fear, which she herself could scarcely understand, Miss Maplethorpe stopped her.

"I—I think, if I were you, I would open that in your own room."

Mopsie replaced the other things, shut the lids, and took the desk away. Miss Maplethorpe went and sat down under the elm-trees. John Ducross had left his gloves there, Mopsie the work she had been playing with when the rulley man came up to the gate. How little, comparatively, his coming meant to those two; how much to herself!

What a window it had opened into the past, how brightly lighted up the only happy time she had ever known ! And the sweetest of all was to know that Martin had remembered too, else why should all be treasured up that had belonged to those days ?

She had been sitting there a long time, when Mopsie came silently up, and laid a folded packet on her knee ; then as silently went away.

There was no name on the packet. She opened it. At the top lay a worn little morocco purse ; inside was a carefully-folded paper, with these words, written in Martin Iselworth's close, neat hand,

“ The ivy-leaf which Callis Maplethorpe gave me in the porch.”

Besides, there was a bundle of letters, whose handwriting was her own.

Faith told the rest of them, in due time, that dinner was ready, but no one disturbed

Miss Maplethorpe, there in the summer-house under the elm-trees. Only towards evening Mopsie stole quietly thither, and kneeling by her side, put her arms round her neck, and said,

“Mother Callis. I think I know. *It might have been I!*”

“Yes, child,” said Miss Maplethorpe. “It might have been.”

Next morning Mopsie and John Ducross were married.

CHAPTER XX.

THIS is all.

Of course the most feeble-minded of novel-readers know well enough that a great deal more ought to have happened. Indeed, if this had been anything like a well-told story, a great deal more *would* have happened.

For instance, Mr. Atcherley would have been found out in that now quite mouldy and forgotten transaction of the selling of his corn to poor Mr. Maplethorpe just when he knew the markets were going down with a crash. Either some letter in connection

with the affair ought to have turned up amongst a pile of old manuscripts, or, if the actual iniquity had never been brought to light, and so dimmed the immaculate purity of Mr. Atcherley's reputation, at least some railway company in which he was interested ought to have collapsed, or the corn trade ought to have been diverted into a different channel, or, at any rate, some reverse should have come to hurl him from the heights of turtle soup and champagne into the poverty which his own avarice had caused others to feel so bitterly.

But nothing of the kind ever happened, so what is the use of saying that it did ?

Instead of being found out in his wickedness, Mr. Atcherley went on getting richer and richer, until people said he could have bought up the whole of Saxelby parish, if he had been so minded. He did not even have the gout to punish him for his evil

doings, but went down to his grave in a hale and hearty old age, enjoying his champagne and his turtle soup, and all the rest of his good things, quite on to the very end, and actually dying with a piece of *pâté de foie gras* at his elbow. Nay, to make matters still better for him, just after he had cleared an extra fifty thousand by an unexpectedly good speculation, good Mrs. Atcherley departed this life, and Millicent, who was tired of Germany, came to keep house for him, so that his establishment could be carried on with an air of style and magnificence which in poor Harriet's time had never been possible. Nobody asked about Mr. von Strengel—indeed, it soon began to be quietly taken for granted that he was not a sort of person to be asked about, and as Millicent did not seem to trouble herself about him, nobody else did.

Mrs. Maleveron, too, ought to have come

to grief in some quite tangible manner. What is the use of having a word like retribution in the dictionary, if it cannot be brought to bear upon such people? Society ought to have found her out. The vicar and his wife should have got tired of her. All the things that her little income was invested in should have begun to pay bad dividends. "George dear" should have discovered that he could not afford that fifty pounds a year any longer. She should have been obliged to go into some situation where she would be very uncomfortable—putting on tapes and buttons at fifteen pounds a year, for instance, or reaping in the field of Boaz, but not lighting, as Ruth did, upon an eligible part of the property. And to put the finishing touch to everything, she ought to have had rheumatism at the last, until she could scarcely move about at all, to say nothing of doing it with

the ease and suppleness of an eel or a cobra.

But how sweetly Mrs. Maleveron would have laughed at the idea of anything of that sort ever happening to her! Such women have too much oil in their systems, both moral and physical, for rheumatism ever to take hold upon them, and their shares never pay bad dividends, and if they are unfortunate enough to be reduced to gleaning in the somewhat scanty field of remunerative employment for ladies, they are never unfortunate enough not to know where to look for Boaz, and find him, too.

No, Mrs. Maleveron prospered, as clever women always do—that is, when they are both clever and unscrupulous. She was so pleasant with dear Marian, and made herself so agreeable, not to say useful, in the house, that she stayed on from year to year, until really the vicar and his wife would

scarcely have known what to do without her. She was so kind, so considerate, always so ready to dine out or go to an afternoon tea for Marian; or to use her tickets for concerts and flower-shows when Marian had parochial work to attend to; or, if Marian had a headache, to take her place at the head of the dinner-table, and entertain the guests, and say privately to them what a pity it was that her brother had not chosen a wife who could sustain his position for him.

“Instead, you know, of leaving me to do *everything* in the way of social, and indeed I may say, household duty. But George *would* take his own way, and I am sure the poor people of the parish ought to be *very* thankful to her, for she spends herself entirely among them. So good of her, and never troubles herself about anything that goes on in the house.”

Which was a great story. Only Mrs. Maleveron was clever at telling great stories, and could tell them, too, with such sweetness and pathos that no one, especially if that one happened to be a gentleman, was ever tired of listening to them.

And she kept up very friendly relations, too, with Mrs. Ducross, beginning by sending across as a wedding present, the night before the marriage, the loveliest little Indian silver bracelet of Cuttack work. It was exactly the same pattern as the one which Mopsie had taken out of her mother's jewel-case the same day; indeed, if the truth must be told, it had belonged to Mopsie's mother, and Mrs. Maleveron had brought it away with her from India, eighteen years before, to take care of for the dear child, of course wearing it herself, when necessary, for the sake of keeping it in order, because nothing tarnishes like

silver when it is not in regular use. And the night before the wedding she sent it across, with the sweetest little note, hoping Mopsie would accept it as a trifling remembrance from Tantie, but not of course telling her that it ought to have been hers all along, whether Tantie gave it up or not.

Mopsie noticed that the patterns were the same. But then India is not fertile in design, however skilled in workmanship, as Mrs. Maleveron remarked a few weeks afterwards, when she went to call upon the young bride.

“It is quite a fortunate coincidence, is it not, Mopsie, darling, that they should both be of the same pattern? Because it is so much better and more effective to have one’s ornaments *en suite*. Of course you will not wear them together as bracelets, because nobody does that now; but one of them will make an exquisite necklet, and

that delicate Indian silver work suits your style perfectly. I am so glad I thought of sending it to you."

With a great deal more to the same effect. And then, as the head-master was very much engaged just at that time with school-work, she proposed spending the rest of the day with Mopsie, as there was nothing to require her presence at the vicarage. She was sure Mopsie must be dull, left by herself in that way, especially as she had always been accustomed to plenty of the most agreeable society.

"But, Mopsie dear, you must remember that you have *nothing* to do but send across to me, and I shall be so delighted to come and sit with you, or even to stay a few days when your husband happens to be away. Never hesitate, darling, for I assure you I shall always be ready to make any sacrifice for your comfort. Indeed, you

know, I look upon you quite as my own child, and I should wish you to consider me in every respect as your mother, and consult me and advise with me, and make use of me, just, you know, as if we *were* mother and daughter. I assure you that is what I should like above all things."

Which was slightly different from the manner in which Mrs. Maleveron had expressed herself when she wrote from Chalford. But that letter was never mentioned now, nor Mrs. Darrell, nor the tape and button situation, nor the relationship of "mere courtesy," which was once all that Tantie wished to preserve between them. If that little bit of history ever did by accident struggle to the light, Mrs. Maleveron always explained it away by saying that she was so worried at the time by different things crowding upon her mind, all wanting attending to and disposing of in the best

way—meaning, by that, the way in which they would best serve her own interests, though, of course, she did not say so—that really it was a marvel she ever managed to keep her senses at all.

“And so good for nothing as I am, when brains are wanted. But you know all about it now, Mopsie, and you and dear Mr. Ducross can quite understand me, and that is such a comfort. I am quite happy, so long as people understand me.”

With which lovely little bit of hypocrisy Mrs. Maleveron disappears from our vision.

Then the Miss Maplethorpes should have had a legacy, but they never did have one.

Did they want it, living that pure, quiet, peaceable life in the little cottage by the brook side? They never knew the greed for gain which had made them poor. Having what society calls nothing, they yet possessed all things, in that goodness which

is satisfied from itself. Calmly the days came and went, until for Callis the last had gone, and she lay with her father and mother in the old family grave, under the south wall of Saxelby Abbey church, her long patient stint of work and waiting quite done, only its memory living on still in the more fruitful lives of those whom her influence had touched.

Close by the gravestone was a plain lancet window. John Ducross had it filled with stained glass, and underneath were the names of old Mr. and Mrs. Maplethorpe and Callis and Martin Iselworth. In the stone beneath were graven the words—

"They are all Thine, oh! Thou Lover of souls."

Phebe has searchings of heart sometimes about that inscription. Not that it expresses anything but the strictest truth, for she is firmly convinced that her dear father and

mother, as well as Callis and poor Martin Iselworth, though belonging to the Church of England, and therefore parts of what might be called a dead branch in the tree of life, are yet, somehow or other, safe in the keeping of everlasting love, but because the words are not in the Bible. Indeed, she had never so much as heard of them until Mr. Ducross told her they were to be found in the Apocrypha. Now Phebe thinks of the Apocrypha in connection with the Bible, much as she thinks of the Established Church in connection with her own denomination. It is eligible to mercy, but the mercy is uncovenanted mercy. It is, as it were, a dead branch, though she cannot deny that now and then it puts forth leaves of exceeding freshness and beauty. At the same time she is comforted, for John Ducross chose the inscription, and whatever John Ducross does is right in her sight, let

him belong to dead or living branch, or no branch at all.

They would fain have had Phebe go and live with them after her sister's death, but she preferred the little cottage, and the duties and the memories and the pleasures that during well-nigh forty years had gathered round her there. John said it was better so, and they left her in peace. There, a white-haired, pleasant-faced woman, she lives on still, tending her flower-beds under the lavender-hedge, thinking sweet thoughts of the past, sweeter of the future. And at night Faith comes into the parlour, and they read a chapter in the Bible and have prayers, and sometimes old Joan—who seems as if she meant to keep on living for ever—toddles down from the Mannersby almshouses, and they have what she calls “conversation to spiritual profit;” and then

the angel of peace folds his wings over that little homestead, and all is still.

For Reuben went to "better himself" in London, and never came back, having found some one there who was willing to have the banns published as soon as he liked. How he prospers in mind, body, and estate, Faith does not know; but this she knows, that she will stay by Phebe Maplethorpe until her death, and then go and end her own days at Mannersby, where Mrs. Boverley-Carroll has promised her a little home on the sunny side of the quadrangle.

For as she says, and Joan Latimer supports her in it—

"They're a poor lot, are the men, when it comes to being over-much mixed up with them."

THE END.



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